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The *rDzogs chen* Doctrine of the Three Gnoses (*ye shes gsum*): An Analysis of Klong chen pa's Exegesis and His Sources¹

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Introduction: *rDzogs chen* Gnoseology and its Role in Tibetan Intellectual History

The view of *rDzogs chen*, or Atiyoga, the ultimate vehicle of both rNying ma pa and Bon po, describes the Absolute, the Primordial Base (*gdod ma'i gzhi*), as endowed with "Three Gnoses" (*ye shes gsum ldan*): the Essence which is empty (*ngo bo stong pa*), the Nature which is clear (*rang bzhin gsal ba*) and the Compassion which is unobstructed or all-pervading (*thugs rje ma 'gags pa / kun khyab*). Within the three series of *rDzogs chen* (*Sems sde*, *Klong sde*, *Man ngag sde*), it is especially in the third one, the "Series of Secret Instructions" (*Man ngag sde*), that these topics have been fully developed.²

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² The names of Essence and Nature are sometimes used reversely in *Sems sde* literature such as in the *Tantra of the All-Accomplishing King* (*Kun byed rgyal po'i rgyud*) (Achard 2005: 64, n. 3). In this paper we focus on Klong chen pa's exegesis of the Three Gnoses. And as a matter of fact, he relies essentially on *Man ngag sde* sources. Thus, the genesis of the doctrine of the Three Gnoses within the Three Series of *rDzogs chen* remains for a future investigation. We should note that the Three Gnoses have also been used to categorize the Three Series. In the Bon po tradition, Yongdzin Lopon Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche (2012: 190-193) equates *Klong sde* with the empty Essence, *Sems sde* with the clear Nature, and *Man ngag sde* with their inseparability. We have not found yet such an interesting and straightforward model in Klong chen pa but in GThDz 1131.2-1132.4, the latter defines the Three Series as an ordered progression from (1) the "gathering [of all perception] into the Expanse in the great freedom of extremes, non-duality" (*gnyis med mtha' grol chen por dbyings su sdud pa*) (= *Sems sde*), (2) "the entrance into the great Primordial Purity, pure and equal Expanse (*dbyings dag mnyam ka dag chen po la 'jug pa*) (= *Klong sde*), and (3) "how to remain in the pure Expanse of the

They are actually present throughout its literature, the so-called *Seventeen Tantras*, later systematized for the posterity by the great adept Klong chen Rab 'byams Dri med 'od zer (1308-1364). The doctrine of the Three Gnoses serves to define the most abridged definition of the Primordial Base. Actually, the many explanations can be subsumed under these three categories, as reports Klong chen pa with a quotation from the *Guirland of Pearls* (*Mu tig phreng ba*):³

There are many explanations about the aspects of the Natural State. But [in essence,] they are the three kinds of Gnosis.

The doctrine of the Three Gnoses is thus central to *rDzogs chen*. But even if its general characterization is now well-known, it has rarely been treated as such. In this regard secondary literature has tended to reflect how the subject is generally treated in primary sources.⁴ But because of its importance, actual depth, and philosophical impact in Tibetan intellectual history, the idea of the authors of the present paper was that the doctrine of the Three Gnoses deserves a special attention in itself. On the basis of previous achievements in the field,⁵ we have considered the possibilities and interest of a thorough examination of its nature and possible origins. For practical reasons, we have decided first to focus on its exegesis in Klong chen pa's works and its sources, by collecting, combining and analyzing different passages on this topic. This defines the scope of the present paper.

The "Three Gnoses" forms a category unique to *rDzogs chen*. Through the medium of such a trinity, they express its special view: that of the "indivisibility of Primordial Purity and Spontaneous Accomplishment" (*ka dag lhun grub dbyer med*): the "Great Unique Sphere" (*thig le nyag gcig chen po*). The decisive point of this view is

pure and great natural luminosity of Spontaneous Accomplishment" (*lhun grub rang gsal chen po dag pa'i dbyings la ji ltar gnas pa*) (=Man ngag sde).

³ ZGP 83.2-3: *Mu tig phreng ba las / gnas lugs rnam pa mang bshad kyang // ye shes rnam pa gsum yin no //*. Cf. *Mu tig phreng ba* 577.1: *gnas lugs bsam gyis mi khyab kyang // ye shes rnam pa gsum yin no //*. The original *tantra* makes a contrast between the inconceivable Absolute and the three concepts of Gnoses.

⁴ The model of the Three Gnoses is largely distributed at the various levels of *rDzogs chen* discourse and practice, but it is rarely developed in itself. Moreover, its mentions can be quite repetitive. For these reasons, the present study required the consideration of a vast array of texts, and the careful combination of many short passages.

⁵ In this aim, the authors are greatly indebted to the pioneer works of Herbert Guenther (1983), Samten Gyaltsen Karmay (1988), as well as of David Germano (1992), and Jean-Luc Achard, the latter having analyzed the Three Gnoses in depth, in connection to the notion of the Base (1999), its seven interpretations (2003), its manifestations (2005), and the problem of the apparition of ignorance (2008), etc.

that the two aspects of Emptiness (*stong pa'i cha*) and Clarity (*gsal ba'i cha*), defining respectively *ka dag* and *lhun grub*, Essence and Nature, are indivisible since the origin (*gdod nas dbyer med*).⁶ The third Gnosis, Compassion, forms thus in a sense a middle term expressing this indivisibility. In the following quotation, Klong chen pa captures the essential philosophical meaning of the Three Gnoses:⁷

Essence being empty (*stong pa*), substances or characteristics are not established.

Nature being clear (*gsal ba*), the own essence of the manifestation of primordial radiance is not rejected.

Compassion, being Pure Awareness (*rig pa*), remains the unobstructed (*ma 'gags pa*) basis of the complete arising as knowing Gnosis.

The doctrine of the Three Gnoses expresses thus in a unique way the transcendence of the extremes of existence (through the non-establishment of substances and characteristics) and non-existence (through the non-rejection of appearances), and the confrontation of the intrinsic presence of a gnoseological element at the heart of *rDzogs chen* soteriology: "Compassion" defined as "Pure Awareness".

While the questions of the origins of the *Man ngag sde*⁸ are beyond the limited scope of the present paper, we would like to suggest that the "Buddhicization"⁹ of *rDzogs chen*, a process culminating in the works of Klong chen pa, is inseparable from a complementary tendency of the "*rDzogs chen*-ization" of Buddhism, at least in some Tibetan schools and trends. In both tendencies, the doctrine of the Three Gnoses appears to be paradigmatic.

In his study of classical *rDzogs chen*, David Higgins observes a "global reconfiguration of the entire Buddhist path around the guiding topos of primordial knowing [=Gnosis] and its existential disclo-

⁶ They have never been separated, and thus do not have to be re-united by artificial means. Their direct realization, as they are, forms the Path of the reintegration of the individual into its primordial condition, the natural freedom beyond ignorance, passions, *karma*, and the suffering of cyclic existence.

⁷ ThChDz 148b3-4: *ngo bo stong pas dngos po dang mtshan mar ma grub / rang bzhin gsal bas ye gdangs snang ba'i rang ngo ma dor / thugs rje rig pas mkhyen pa ye shes su rgyas pa'i 'char gzhi ma 'gags par gnas te /*.

⁸ Whether Bon, rNying ma, or both with a common source which can possibly be Śaiva (Achard 1999); but probably not Chan, unless we accept the evolutionist theory stating that its combination with tantrism led to the formation of *rDzogs chen*. But the specificity of *thod rgal*'s theory, esoteric anatomy, and practices, as shown by Achard (*id.*) give stronger credit to the thesis of an independent tradition that has nevertheless interacted with all the others.

⁹ By this, we mean the harmonization of *rDzogs chen* with Buddhist sūtric and tantric systems and vocabulary.

sure.”¹⁰ According to him, *rDzogs chen* gnoseology, distinguishing mind (*sems*: *citta*) and Gnosis (*ye shes*: *jñāna*, which he translates as “primordial knowing”), formed thus a central hermeneutical tool in Klong chen pa’s works to harmonize the various levels of Buddhist teachings and practices.¹¹ While the *Man ngag sde* texts make complex distinctions and classifications of Gnoses, integrating and reorganizing *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayāna* categories, Higgins observes that in this system, the Three Gnoses “provide the framework for understanding all the others.”¹²

An exemplary case of *rDzogs chen*-ization may be also seen in the treatment by rNying ma scholars of the Tibetan controversy about whether it is the Second Wheel of the *Dharma* or the Third Wheel of the *Dharma* that is of definitive meaning (*nges don*: *nītārtha*).¹³ This complementarity is precisely seen as that of the empty aspect (*stong pa’i cha*) and the luminous aspect (*gsal ba’i cha*), based on the *rDzogs chen* view of their primordial indivisibility. And Dorje Wangchuk even concludes that the view of the *Tathāgatagarbha* for rNying ma

¹⁰ Higgins: 136. Higgins has described in particular the ten modes of Gnoses found in the *sPros bral don gsal* and the abridged *Thig le kun gsal*. The problem of the Tibetan assimilation of Buddhism is also well phrased when he writes that the “reception and interpretation of a remarkably heterogeneous amalgam of Buddhist teachings that had been developing for more than a millennium and over an entire subcontinent called for unusually innovative forms of doctrinal synthesis and practical guidance.” In this regards, he adds that: “In exploring the soteriological implications of the principal *rDzogs chen* distinction between dualistic mind (*sems*) and primordial knowing (*ye shes*), I am proposing that it be viewed as an indispensable hermeneutical key to understanding how rNying ma authors sought to synthesize divergent, and at times seemingly contradictory, models of Buddhist path within a single framework of study and practice” (226-227).

¹¹ *rDzogs chen*, the ninth vehicle of the main rNying ma and Bon po doxographies, is precisely distinguished from the others on the basis of the distinction between mind and Gnosis. So when this becomes the hermeneutical key to explain Buddhism as a whole, *rDzogs chen* represents a meta-point of view for interpreting all other vehicles.

¹² Higgins 108-110. Achard (1999:112-116) has shown the various classifications of *rig pa*, Pure Awareness, in five or fifteen categories. The Three Gnoses belong to the “Pure Awareness Dwelling in the Base” (*gzhi gnas kyi rig pa*). Their indivisibility is also constantly reminded with special expressions such as the “Unique Pure Awareness” (*rig pa nyag gcig*).

¹³ Dorji Wangchuk (2004) has exposed in his analysis of the rNying ma exegesis of the *Tathāgatagarbha* that those two currents philosophically represented by the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra schools (also seen as representative of respectively the negative/intellectualist/apophatic vs. positive/mystical/cataphatic approaches, or in Tibetan controversial terms as *rang stong* or *gzhan stong*) were generally seen as complementary for the rNying ma authors. See the position integrating *rang stong* and *gzhan stong* of a proto-*ris med* figure such as Prajñārāśmi (‘Phreng po gter ston Shes rab ’od zer, 1518-1584) in his *Ambrosia of Study, Reflection and Meditation* (*Thos bsam dang sgom pa ’chi med kyi bdud rtsi*). Deroche forthcoming 1.

authors relies ultimately on the *rDzogs chen* definition of the Primordial Base endowed with the Three Gnoses.¹⁴

When the *Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka* had become generally accepted in Tibet as the philosophical summit, its notion of “absence of discursive elaborations” (*spros med: niṣprapañca*) tended to be correlated with the *rDzogs chen* definition of Primordial Purity (*ka dag*) by rNying ma authors. But the idea that the view of the *Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka* is the “indivisibility of the two truths” (*bden gnyis dbyer med*) as exposed by Mi pham, and others before him, may actually reflect the view of *rDzogs chen*, and the effort to harmonize it with *Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka*.¹⁵ The necessity for the rNying ma school vis-à-vis the gSar ma schools to show the Buddhist orthodoxy of its treasured *rDzogs chen*, formed the context for such arrangement.¹⁶ But it is the *Yogācārā-Madhyamaka* of Śāntideva, central during the first assimilation of Buddhism in Tibet, and revived in the 19th century so-called *ris med* movement, that reflects more on the plane of sūtric discourse the complementarity of the two aspects of emptiness and clarity, inseparable in the *rDzogs chen* meta-point of view.

In many respects, the so-called 19th century impartial (*ris med*) movement, encompassing both Bon and Buddhism, rNying ma and gSar ma schools, can be seen as centered on *rDzogs chen*.¹⁷ The con-

¹⁴ Wangchuk (2004: 202-203).

¹⁵ Because no Sanskrit sūtric equivalent can be found for this expression. Prajñārāsmi, in his *Lamp Illuminating the Two Truths*, following clearly a *Prāsaṅgika* approach, explains that the realization of the two truths follows two steps: (1) the two truths are first distinguished, then (2) the two truths are realized as indivisible (*dbyer med*). See Deroche: 2011. But we may add that in *rDzogs chen*, the inseparability is presented since the beginning.

¹⁶ Regarding the exegesis of *rDzogs chen*, it seems that the Bon po school, historically even more marginalized than the rNying ma school in Tibet, took a totally different position as it is now better known in the West through the activity of traditional teachers like Yongs 'dzin slob dpon bstan 'dzin rnam dag rin po che. It appears that the Bon po school in its contemporary state has maintained a stronger differentiation between *sūtra*, *tantra* and *rDzogs chen*, in terms of Base, Path and Fruit. In this line of thought, only the view of *rDzogs chen* can be strictly defined as the indivisibility (*dbyer med*) of the empty and luminous aspects. The view of the Base in the *Madhyamaka* cannot be the indivisibility of the truths, since they need to be differentiated in order to practice alternatively (and not simultaneously) the two accumulations necessary to obtain the two Buddha-bodies in this system. Similarly, the view of *tantra* is seen as the conjunction (*zung 'jug*) of wisdom and means (*thabs dang shes rab*), or bliss and emptiness (*bde stong*), with the artificial creation of the illusory body (*sgyu lus*) as the basis of the formal bodies. In *rDzogs chen* the sole contemplation of the Natural State (*gnas lugs*) indivisible from its self-manifestations (*rang snang*), forms the unique way to obtain complete Buddhahood.

¹⁷ Deroche forthcoming 2. The *ris med* movement's eclectic tendencies have been also criticized from the perspective of a radical *rDzogs chen* point of view, under the critique of the cliché: “the Great *Madhyamaka*, *Mahāmudrā*, and *rDzogs pa chen*”

junction of *Mahāmudrā* and *rDzogs chen* (*phyag rdzogs zung 'jug*) has been the hallmarks of the *bka'*-rnying ma eclectic trends that have anticipated and led to the emergence of the 19th century *ris med* movement, connecting also the levels of *sūtra* and *tantra* within the category of *Madhyamaka* (*rang stong* and *gzhan stong*, or *sūtric* and *tantric Madhyamaka*), as well as with the non-gradual *Mahāmudrā* (of the *sūtra*-s or the *tantra*-s) taught by sGam po pa and his successors. Such *bka'* rnying eclectic trends give thus primacy to the direct introduction (*ngo sprod*) to the Natural State. And even the vocabulary of such confrontation in the *Mahāmudrā* of the Dwags po *bka'* brgyud, as well as of the Shangs pa *bka'* brgyud,¹⁸ appears very close to *rDzogs chen*, notably in reference to the Three Gnoses equated with the *trikāya*.

But the doctrine of the Three Gnoses could be equally seen as reflecting the Buddhicization of *rDzogs chen*, that is to say the use of classical Buddhist terms for conceptions and practices of a different level (and possibly different origins). Thus, the very terminology of the “Essence which is empty” (*ngo bo stong pa*) and “Nature which is luminous” (*rang bzhin gsal ba*) could be considered as markers of the use of *Madhyamaka* and *Yogācāra* notions in order to adapt the teachings of *rDzogs chen* within a Buddhist discourse and setting. The close association of the Three Gnoses with the *trikāya* is another example of such Buddhicization.

po are the same” (*dbu ma chen po phyag rgya chen po rdzogs pa chen po gcig pa red*). See Yondzin Lopen Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche 2012: in particular 57-106. See also Achard 1999: 69 n. 34. The Bon po critique of this cliché is that these three topics belong respectively to the three categories of *sūtra*, *tantra* and *rDzogs chen*. And thus they are definitely not considered to be the same. In this regard, a major statement is given in the celebrated *Aspiration to Mahāmudrā* by the 3rd Karmapa Rang byung rdo rje (1284-1339), who is also famous for his *rDzogs chen* transmission and lineage known as the *Karma snying thig*, and thus exemplary of the highest level of integration of *Man ngag sde* teachings into the Karma *bka'* brgyud school. Indeed, Rang byung rdo rje's point of view on the unity of *Madhyamaka*, *Mahāmudrā* and *rDzogs chen* is much more subtle and profound than a naïve formulation of identity like in the cliché quoted above. He writes (*Nges don phyag rgya chen po'i smon lam*, 6.4-5): *yid byed bral ba 'di ni phyag rgya che || mtha' dang bral ba dbu ma chen po yin || 'di ni kun 'dus rdzogs chen zhes kyang bya || gcig shes kun don rtoqs pa'i gdengs thob shog* /. “Free from mentation: this is the Great Seal. Free from extremes, this is the Great Middle. This, all inclusive, is called also the Great Perfection. May I, by knowing one, obtain the certainty of the realization of the meaning of all.” This expression *gcig shes kun don rtoqs* (“knowing one, realizing the meaning of all”) may also be correlated with the *rDzogs chen* principle of *gcig shes kun grol*, “knowing one, liberating all.” On this principle see Karmay 1988: 198; Achard 1999: 150.

¹⁸ We should note that Khyung po *rnal 'byor*, at the origin of the Shangs pa lineage, was first a mature Bon po and *rDzogs chen* master before going to search the *Dharma* in India during his fifties.

The fact that *rDzogs chen* is not found in available Sanskrit sources leaves us only with speculation concerning the possible Sanskrit terms corresponding to the Three Gnoses. Considering the association with *Madhyamaka* philosophy and the doctrine of Emptiness, the Sanskrit equivalent for the first Gnosis, the Essence (*ngo bo*), could be *svabhāva*. Then *Yogācāra*'s notions such as *prakṛtiprabhāśvaracitta*, would suggest that the second Gnosis, Nature (*rang bzhin*), especially qualified as luminous (*gsal ba: prabhāśvara*), might well correspond to *prakṛti*. But the last Gnosis, Compassion (*thugs rje*), remains much more complex and giving any Sanskrit usual equivalents such as *karuṇā*, even more hypothetical than for the other two. It has been pointed out that, in this context of the Primordial Base, this third Gnosis does not bear the same ethical connotations of *Mahāyāna* discourse, with the virtues and salvific capacities of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Some have thus opted for the translation as "Energy" (Norbu & Adriano 1999). But others have shown that its description already implied a providential character and maintained "Compassion." (Germano 1992; Achard: 1999). Another way has been to integrate both aspects of inherent dynamism and universal benevolence, with translations such as "resonating concern" (Guenther: 1983/2001), "compassionate resonance" (Germano 1992) or "compassionate responsiveness" (Higgins 2013). We have decided here to keep the single and simple word Compassion and examine its complexity. The reason is that in this context, the central definition of *thugs rje* is of gnoseological nature, being equated to the key notion of Pure Awareness (*rig pa*). Moreover, like the term "Energy," interpretative translations such as "compassionate responsiveness," seem rather to express the "dynamic power of Compassion/Pure Awareness" (*thugs rje'i rtsal, rig pa'i rtsal*) which is to be distinguished from Compassion itself. If it were not a little bit odd, a word-by-word translation of *thugs rje* as the "Mind-Lord," the "Lord (*rje*) of the Mind/Heart (*thugs*)" or the enlightened Mind which is the Lord (since *thugs* is honorific), may actually be preferred in order to address the gnoseological problem at stake with the third Gnosis. And such a translation would keep the connotations of "noble mind" or "good heart" associated with the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit *karuṇā* and others related terms.¹⁹

The categories of the Three Gnoses, as well as the *rDzogs chen* tradition, belong more generally to the category of mysticism or esotericism, with the insistence of a direct presentation by a qualified master, devotion and the blessing of a spiritual lineage, the consideration of a

¹⁹ See Germano (1992: 852-857) for insightful remarks on *thugs rje* in the context of the Three Gnoses.

subtle anatomy, the application of yogic techniques, and visionary experiences.²⁰ Nevertheless, the characterization of the Base with the Three Gnoses brings up the philosophical problem of ascribing cognitive or gnoseological elements to the Absolute. As studied by Orna Almogi, this question has a complex history in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism, with the debate of whether a Buddha, in its ultimate status, possesses Gnosis or not.²¹ As we shall see the doctrine of the Three Gnoses can be seen as the *rDzogs chen* theoretical and practical resolution of this problem. It may not be surprising that for Klong chen pa, the thesis stating that a Buddha possesses Gnosis was considered to be the correct one.²² But even if Essence, Nature and Compassion, being indivisible, are all called “Gnoses,” it is particularly the examination of the third and middle term, “Compassion,” that fully addresses the gnoseological problem.

We shall now take a closer look at the Three Gnoses, following Klong chen pa’s exegesis and his quotations from the *tantra*-s of the *Man ngag sde*.²³ We will proceed first with an examination of the Three Gnoses dwelling in the primordial Base. Then, we will see how the Three Gnoses manifest in two ways: as the ground for the *trikāya* of a perfect Buddha, or as the source of the samsāric universe and beings. After, we will analyze how the shift of recognition which distinguishes these two existential options is addressed in the doctrine of the Three Gnoses, by a special focus on “Compassion.” Finally, we shall consider how the Three Gnoses are reflected on the structure of the *rDzogs chen* Path that leads to the Fruit of a perfect Buddha.

1. The Three Gnoses Defining the Base

The definitions of the Base according to the Three Gnoses are extremely frequent and often repetitive. Klong chen pa quotes several

²⁰ As pointed out by Achard (1999: 213), the characteristic of *rDzogs chen* is that the Base is directly perceived through the senses (*dbang po mngon gsum*), i.e. the eyes.

²¹ See in particular Almogi 2009: “Chapter Three: The Controversy Surrounding the Existence of Gnosis.”

²² See Higgins (2013: 131) for references.

²³ His main sources about the Three Gnoses are the *Seventeen Tantra-s* of *Man ngag sde*. As for the *Seventeen Tantra-s*, nine *tantra*-s (*sGra thal ’gyur*, *Mu tig phreng ba*, *bKra shis mdzes ldan*, *Rig pa rang shar*, *Kun bzang klong drug*, *sNying gi me long*, *Nyi zla kha sbyor*, *Nor bu phra bkod*, and *Thugs kyi me long*) are quoted concerning the Three Gnoses. But we have not found any quotation about the Three Gnoses from the eight others (*rDzogs pa rang byung*, *Rig pa rang grol*, *Seng ge rtsal rdzogs*, *Yi ge med pa*, *sGron ma ’bar ba*, *Ngo sprod spras pa*, *sKu gdung ’bar ba*, and *Rin chen spungs pa*). In this paper, we focus more on Klong chen pa’s quotations than on the original sources. Thus, extracts from *rDzogs chen tantra*-s are given only for reference and kept for future investigation.

times *The Mirror of the Heart of Vajrasattva*, giving as well the Three Gnoses' most general qualifications:

Know all phenomena of the Base as the Three: namely, Essence,
Nature, and Compassion.
Moreover, know all phenomena of the Essence as empty.
Know all phenomena of the Nature as clear.
Know all phenomena of the Compassion as all-pervasive.²⁴

The Three Gnoses define the Base in its very primordially, before any manifestation. This original state is known in *rDzogs chen* terminology as the Youthful Vase Body. *The Tantra of Self-Apparition* is often quoted by Klong chen pa in this regard.²⁵

In the past, when I did not exist, the Base abided in this way.
It was called "the Base, the Great Primordial Purity," and abided
as [having] three aspects: Essence, Nature, and Compassion.

²⁴ ZGP 69.5-6: sNying gi me long las / gzhi'i chos thams cad ngo bo rang bzhin thugs rje gsum du shes par gyis shig / de yang ngo bo'i chos thams cad stong par shes par gyis shig / rang bzhin gyi chos thams cad gsal bar shes par gyis shig / thugs rje'i chos thams cad kun la khyab par shes par gyis shig / ces so // Cf. sNying gi me long 576.3-4: gzhi'i chos thams cad ngo bo rang bzhin thugs rje gsum du shes par gyis shig // . Ibid. 576.5-6: ngo bo'i chos thams cad stong par shes par gyis shig // rang bzhin gyis (sic, read gyi) chos thams cad gsal bar shes par gyis shig // thugs rje'i chos thams cad sems can thams cad la khyab par ngo shes par gyis shig // The first part of this quotation is also found for example in TshDDz 796.5-797.1. The general qualifications of the Three Gnoses are repeated constantly, as in *Mu tig phreng ba*, "the Base [is endowed with three aspects:] Essence, Nature, and Compassion which arises all-pervasively. GThDz 1215.1-2: de nyid las / gzhi ni ngo bo rang bzhin dang // thugs rje kun la khyab cing 'char // ces so // Cf. *Mu tig phreng ba* 572.6: gzhi ni ngo bo rang bzhin dang // thugs rje kun la khyab cing 'char //

²⁵ ZGP 75.2-5: Rang shar las / nga med pa'i sngon rol na gzhi'i gnas lugs 'di ltar gnas te / gzhi ka dag chen po zhes bya ba ngo bo rang bzhin thugs rje gsum du gnas so // ngo bo mi 'gyur ba'i ye shes ma 'gags par gsal ba gzhon nu bum pa'i sku'i gnas lugs zhes bya'o // rang bzhin 'od lnga'i snang ba ma 'gags pa'o // thugs rje'i snang ba ni dper nam mkha' sprin med pa lta bu'o // de dag ni ngo bo ka dag gi gnas lugs zhes bya ste // rgya gar yang ma chad / phyogs gang du yang ma lhung ba'o // zhes so // Cf. *Rig pa rang shar* 99.6-100.1: nga med pa'i sngon rol na // gzhi 'di ltar gnas te // gzhi ka dag chen po zhes bya ste // ngo bo rang bzhin thugs rje gsum gnas so // ngo bo de mi 'gyur ba'i ye shes ma 'gags par gsal ba gzhon nu bum pa'i sku'i gnas lugs zhes bya'o // rang bzhin 'od lnga'i snang ba ma 'gags pa'o // thugs rje'i snang ba ni dper na sprin med pa lta bu'o // de ni ka dag gi gnas lugs zhes bya ste // rgya gar yang ma chad phyogs gar yang ma lhung ba'o // These passages are quoted also in ThChDz 152b4-5 and TshDDz 801.2-5 with few variants. For a French translation of this quotation, see Achard: 65-66. The expression of the Base of Primordial Purity defined according to the Three Gnoses, is also found in TshDDz 796.3: Rang shar las / ka dag chen po'i gzhi de la yang ngo bo rang bzhin thugs rje gsum dang ldan / zhes dang /. Cf. *Rig pa rang shar* 167.1-2: ka dag chen po'i gzhi la yang // ye shes ma 'gags gsal ba'o // de yang ngo bo mi 'gyur dang // rang bzhin gsal bas kun la khyab // ye shes rnam dag ngo bo la // ngo bo rang bzhin thugs rjes (sic, read rje) gsum dang ldan //

The Essence, which is the changeless Gnosis, shined unobstructedly.

It was called “the Natural State of the Youthful Vase Body”.

The Nature, manifestation of the Five Colours, was unobstructed.

The manifestation of Compassion was like the cloudless sky.

This is called “the Natural State of the Essence, Primordial Purity”.

And it is not limited or not partial at all.

This condition is prior to the distinction of recognition or non-recognition, with the consequent apparition of Buddhas or deluded beings.²⁶ This original condition before the manifestation of various objects is particularly defined as the “Primordial Purity.” This is the mode of the Essence. The Essence is here categorized as the changeless Gnosis.²⁷ In other sources, the Essence in its gnoseo-

²⁶ Another example: ThChDz 149a4-149b1: *bKra shis mdzes ldan chen po'i rgyud las / rtogs pa'i sangs rgyas ma byung / ma rtogs pa'i sems can ma byung ba'i snga rol na / rig pa rang byung gi ye shes gzhi las ma g.yos te / rkyen med pa'i snang ba gsum dang thabs gcig tu bzhugs so // de nas yang rig pa'i ye shes nyid kyis / rang gi 'dug tshul gyi gnas lugs 'di gsungs so // skye [sic, read kye] snang ba chen po yangs pa'i klong 'di ni ma g.yos pa'i chos kyi sku chen po las / ma 'khrul pa'i sangs rgyas chen por bzhugs so // ngo bo'i sku ma 'gags par gnas te / ngo bo mi 'gyur / thabs gsang pa / ma g.yos / mi g.yo / ma bskyod pa / snang ba thams cad dus gcig la rdzogs pa / ye shes thams cad skad cig la rdzogs pa / sku thams cad smin par gnas pa / 'od kyi snang ba thams cad ma bsgrigs par gsal ba / gnas lugs kyi snang ba la / snang thabs kyis ma bsgrigs pa ngo bo rang bzhin thugs rje gsum rgya ma chad par yongs su rdzogs pa chen po'o //* Kong chen pa quotes the great tantra of the *bKra shis mdzes ldan*: “In the past, when Buddhas who have realized [the Base] and sentient beings who have not realized [it] did not emerge, the Pure Awareness, Self-Originated Gnosis, not moving from the Base, abided together with three unconditioned “presences” (*snang ba*). Then, the Gnosis of Pure Awareness itself told about the Natural State of its “presencing” (*'dug tshul*): Ho! This infinite expanse of the great presence abides as the great Buddha who has not been bewildered from the great body of the reality that is unmovable. The Body of Essence abides unobstructedly. Its essence is changeless. Its means are secret. It did not move, it will not move. It is unshaking. All appearances are simultaneously perfect. All gnoses are instantly perfect. All Buddha-Bodies are matured. All the luminous manifestations are radiating without being obscured. In the presence of its Natural State, the three [aspects of] Essence, Nature, and Compassion, are not obscured by means of appearances. They are the Great Perfection, vast and without limitations. [...]” These passages are quoted also in TshDDz 801.5-802.5

²⁷ This definition is also found in another quotation: “The Essence is changeless in the three times. The Nature is always unobstructed. The Compassion completely illuminates everywhere.” ZGP 83.1-2: *Nor bu phra bkod las / ngo bo dus gsum 'gyur ba med // rang bzhin rtag tu 'gags pa med // thugs rje kun la rab snang zhing // zhes pa dang /*. Cf. *Nor bu phra bkod* 484.4: *ngo bo dus gsum 'gyur ba med // rang bzhin rtag tu 'gag pa med // thugs rje kun la rab snang ba'o //*. Note here that the epithet “unobstructed” is given to Nature, while it is more generally attributed to Compassion. But the relation between Nature and Compassion is especially close since Clarity, or “luminosity,” is semantically connected to the “lucidity” of Intelligence or Pure Awareness.

logical status, is particularly equated with Primordial Purity, while the Nature is connected with Spontaneous Accomplishment. Compassion appears thus here to be a middle term between the two elements of *ka dag* and *lhun grub*, as we will examine more closely below. Klong chen pa quotes the *Tantra of the Union of Sun and Moon*:²⁸

There are Three Gnoses abiding in the Base:

- [1] Essence, the Gnosis of Primordial Purity,
- [2] Nature, the Gnosis of Spontaneous Accomplishment,
- [3] Compassion, the Gnosis of Self-Manifestation.

These definitions of the Three Gnoses are also explained metaphorically in Klong chen pa:²⁹

What are the examples about [the Three Gnoses]? Essence, the Gnosis of Primordial Purity is like the utterly pure sky. Nature, the Gnosis of Spontaneous Accomplishment is like the transparent ocean. Compassion, the All-Pervasive Gnosis is like a stainless jewel.

But all these definitions are just the conventionnal characterization of the Base:

According to the *Tantra of the Six Expanses*: through the three kinds of Gnosis itself, characteristics of the Base are exposed with words.³⁰

Only the use of words within a discursive and thus diachronic exposure shows the Three Gnoses to be separated. But all sources insist on there indivisibility (*dbyer med*) in the synchronic and timeless mode of the unique Pure Awareness. According to the *Tantra of the Penetration of Sound*:³¹

²⁸ ZGP 72.3-4: *Nyi zla kha sbyor las / gzhi gnas kyi ye shes ni gsum ste / ngo bo ka dag gi ye shes / rang bzhin lhun grub kyi ye shes dang / thugs rje rang snang gi ye shes so / zhes bshad do //*. Cf. *Nyi zla kha sbyor* 406.7: *gzhi gnas kyi ye shes ni gsum ste // ngo bo ka dag gi ye shes dang // rang bzhin lhun grub kyi ye shes dang // thugs rje rang snang gi ye shes so //*.

²⁹ TshDDz 810.3-5: *dpe ji ltar du bzhugs na / ngo bo ka nas dag pa'i ye shes nam mkha' rnam par dag pa lta bur bzhugs / rang bzhin lhun gyis grub pa'i ye shes rgya mtsho dangs pa lta bur bzhugs / thugs rje kun la khyab pa'i ye shes nor bu dri ma med pa lta bur bzhugs so //*.

³⁰ TshDDz 796.4-5: *Klong drug pa las / ye shes nyid ni rnam gsum gyis // gzhi yi khyad par tshig tu bstan // zhes pa dang /*. Cf. *Kun bzang klong drug* 649.7: *ye shes nyid ni rnam gsum gyis // gzhi yi khyad par tshig tu bstan //*.

³¹ ZGP 70.6-71.1: *Thal 'gyur las / ye shes rang ngor gnas pa las // gsum gyi tshul du dbyer med do // zhes pa dang / ye shes rnam dag rang gi ngo bo la // ngo bo rang bzhin thugs rje gsum dang ldan // zhes so //*. Cf. *sGra thal 'gyur*. 442.2-3: *ye shes rang ngor gnas // gsum*

Gnosis remaining in itself, is indivisible in three ways. And in the own essence of the utterly pure Gnosis, there are the three [aspects] of Essence, Nature, and Compassion.

The mode of this indivisibility and interrelation is exposed according to Klong chen pa:³²

Essence remains as the indivisibility of Emptiness and Clarity.
Nature remains as the indivisibility of Clarity and Emptiness.
Compassion remains as the indivisibility of Awareness and Emptiness.

Essence and Nature are thus intertwined, as the indivisibility of Emptiness and Clarity, Clarity and Emptiness, with an emphasis on Emptiness for the Essence, and Clarity for the Nature. Compassion appears here to be a middle term with the notion of Awareness, which is nevertheless inseparable from Emptiness. Emptiness thus qualifies here all terms. In another quotation, Compassion appears again as a middle term, this time phrased as the indivisibility of appearances and Emptiness:³³

The Essence, Gnosis of Primordial Purity, is free from all the conceptual constructions [produced out] of ignorance.
The Nature, Gnosis of Spontaneous Accomplishment, is empty and clear self-radiance.
The Compassion, Gnosis of Universal Pervasiveness, is the unobstructed [inseparability] of appearances and Emptiness.

And we have seen already in the quotation of the *Tantra of Self-Apparition*, the indivisibility of the Three Gnoses is also expressed as the absence of bias, partiality, that is to say the limitation of ex-

pa [sic] gyis [sic, read gyi] tshul du dbyer med do // . The second part is not found in the *sGra thal 'gyur* itself. The first sentence is quoted also in ZGP 82.1-3. It is found also with little addition in the TshDDz 796.3-4: *Thal 'gyur las / 'khor dang 'das pa mi gnas pa'i // chos nyid stong pa kun khyab pas // ye shes rang ngor gnas pa la // gsum gyi tshul du dbyer med do // zhes dang /*. "The empty Reality, in which there is not either cyclic existence or extinction, is all-pervasive. Therefore, the Gnosis abiding in itself is indivisible in three ways." Cf. *sGra thal 'gyur* 442.2-3: *'khor dang 'das la mi gnas pas // chos nyid stong pa kun khyab phyir // ye shes rang ngor gnas // gsum pa [sic] gyis [sic, read gyi] tshul du dbyer med do //*.

³² TshDDz 810.3: *ngo bo stong gsal dbyer med / rang bzhin gsal stong dbyer med / thugs rje rig stong dbyer med du bzhugs so //*.

³³ ZGP 72.1-2: *Klong gsal las / ngo bo ka dag ye shes ni // ma rig rtog pa kun dang bral // rang bzhin lhun grub ye shes ni // stong gsal rang mdangs nyid du gnas // thugs rje kun khyab ye shes ni // 'gags med snang stong nyid du gnas // zhes so /*. The part on Compassion is also found in ZGP 81.3.

treme to one side, either empty aspect, luminous aspect, or aware aspect. Klong chen pa quotes the *Tantra of the Luminous Expanse*, to insist on the fact that:³⁴

Because [the Base is at the same time] empty, clear, and unobstructed, it is not limited and partial.

Those three aspects encompass the empty essence, the potentialities and development of all manifestation. The following quotation of the *Tantra of the Penetration of Sound* shows the association of the Essence with the absence of characteristics, and the association of Nature and Compassion with the dynamism of manifestation. Nevertheless the Essence itself contains the potential of manifestation as it is the ultimate nature of manifestation which remains unaffected by it. On the other hand, even if Nature and Compassion are the active sources for manifestation, the sense of indetermination and absence of objectification remains central to their understanding. They are not separated with their manifestation, but at the same time not limited by individual aspects or sides.³⁵

[The Base] abides as [having] three aspects: the primordial Essence, Nature, and Compassion.

[1] Since the Essence abides as Buddha-Body, it is naturally accomplished without distinction and division into the aspects of [the Body of] Reality, [the Body of] Enjoyment, and [the Body of] Emanation. In it, there are no objects of mind such as the complexions of the Buddha-Bodies.

[2] The Nature, which makes possible that [everything] arise, [abides] in the manner of Lights. [They are] white, red, yellow, green and blue. [Nature,] not being biased with characteristics, is a natural accomplishment known as “unbiased.”

[3] Compassion is not ascertained one-sidedly as [something] like this other than the various apparitions. Because it manifests

³⁴ ZGP 75.1-2: Klong gsal las / stong dang gsal dang mi 'gags phyir / rgya chad phyogs lhung med pa'o // zhes pa dang /.

³⁵ ThChDz 149b7-150a2: Thal 'gyur las / thog ma'i ngo bo rang bzhin dang // thugs rje rnam pa gsum du gnas // de yang ngo bo skur gnas pas // chos dang longs spyod sprul pa'i char // ma phyed 'byed pa med pa'i tshul // babs las grub pa nyid la yang // sku mdog la sogs blo yul med // rang bzhin 'char byed 'od kyi tshul // dka' dmar ser dang ljang mthing ni // mtshan ma ris can ma yin par // ris med shes bya'i babs las grub // thugs rje 'char ba sna tshogs las // 'di 'dra gcig tu nges med pas // sna tshogs snang phyir gzhi zhes bya // ces so // Cf. sGra thal 'gyur 472.4-7: thog ma ngo bo rang bzhin dang // thugs rje rnam pa gsum du gnas // chos dang longs spyod sprul pa'i char // ma phyed 'byed pa med pa'i tshul // babs las grub pa nyid la yang // sku mdog la sogs blo yul med // rang bzhin 'char byed 'od kyi tshul // dkar dmar ser dang ljang 'thing ni // mtshan ma rigs can ma yin par // rigs med shes bya babs las grub // thugs rje 'char ba sna tshogs las // 'di 'dra gcig tu nges med pas // sna tshogs snang srid phyir gzhi zhes //.

oneself in a variegated way, it is called the “Base.”

The conjunction of Emptiness and Clarity, Essence and Nature plus Compassion, is often compared to the diffraction of light within a crystal empty of objects and purely transparent.³⁶

2. Correlations with the Three Buddha-bodies

The correlation of the Three Gnoses with the Three Buddha-Bodies exposes the very principle of *rDzogs chen* stating that the Base contains in itself all the enlightened qualities, and that its sole contemplation forms the path to obtain the state of a complete Buddha, with the three dimensions of the *trikāya*. Essence is associated to the Body of Reality (*chos sku: dharmakāya*), Nature to the Body of Enjoyment (*longs spyod rdzogs pa'i sku: sambhogakāya*), and Compassion to the Body of Emanation (*sprul sku: nirmāṇakāya*).

Almogi (2009: 66) reviewed the discussion that the doctrine of the *trikāya* may have been elaborated due to the tension between homogeneity and heterogeneity, the Absolute and a Buddha's salvific activities, with the resolution of the middle term of the Body of Enjoyment, of celestial nature but formal, and designed for soteriological purposes. The doctrine of the Three Gnoses deals exactly with the same patterns, but its originality is to situate such a reconciliatory model within the scope of the Base, the Absolute itself.

If the nature of the correlation between the Three Gnoses and the Three Bodies is not just of a comparison, it is not easily defined as a simple identity. In some occurrences, the Gnoses are presented to belong to the Buddha-Bodies, with the use of the genetive, as in the following quotation of the *Mirror of the Heart of Samantabhadra*:³⁷

³⁶ See for example the following quotation, giving with few other similes of the Three Gnoses. *sNyan brgyud kyi rgyab chos chen mo zab don gnad kyi me long* 209.3-5: *bShad rgyud las / chos sku la ye shes nang gsal du gnas pa ni shel dang / de'i nang gi 'od lngar gsal ba bzhin no // gzhi la sku gsum rdzogs pa ni nyi ma'i snying po la 'od zer mi 'gags pa bzhin no // ngo bo rang bzhin thugs rje gsum gyi dpe ni rma bya'i sgong 'am/ nyi ma nyid dam / nam mkha'i sprin dang char pa bzhin no // yang na man shel bzhin no//*. “The way how Gnoses abide as inner clarity in the Body of Reality, is compared to a crystal and the diffraction of clarity in five lights within it. The way how the Three Buddha-Bodies are perfect in the Base is compared to the absence of obstruction of light rays in the core of the sun. Examples of the three, Essence, Nature, and Compassion are the egg of a peacock, the sun itself, clouds and rain in the sky. There is also the comparison to the crystal.”

³⁷ ZGP 82.6-83.1: *Kun tu bzang po thugs kyi me long las / chos sku'i ye shes bsam 'das brjod med dang // longs sku'i ye shes kha dog ma 'dres gsal // sprul sku'i ye shes cir yang bsgyur du btub / ces pa dang /*. Cf. *Thugs kyi me long* 585.2: *chos sku'i ye shes bsam 'das brjod med dang // longs sku'i ye shes kha dog ma 'dres gsal // sprul sku'i ye shes cir yang*

The Gnosis of the Body of Reality is inconceivable and ineffable.
The Gnosis of the Body of Enjoyment [has] colours which shine
distinctively.
The Gnosis of the Body of Emanation can be transformed into
anything.

But most generally, the Gnoses and Bodies are found in apposition,
like in:³⁸

Primordial purity is the clear and empty non-conceptual Gnosis,
similar to the utterly pure sky of the autumn. Specifically [it is
endowed with three aspects]:
The Essence, empty Gnosis, the Body of Reality;
The Nature, clear Gnosis, the Enjoyment Body;
The Compassion, self-illuminating Gnosis, the Emanation Body.

But in other passages, the Three Gnoses are more precisely defined as
the “basis” (*gzhi*) for the Three Bodies, or their acquisition:³⁹

The Primordial Base [is endowed with] Essence, Nature and
Compassion. Essence is empty, clear, and free from conceptual
constructions, and the basis for the Body of Reality.
Nature is great radiating light, [the inseparability of] appearances
and Emptiness, and the basis for the Body of Enjoyment.
Compassion is unobstructed, accompanied by Pure Awareness
(*rig pa*) and the basis for the Body of Emanation.

It has been already shown that the *trikāya* can be also correlated with
the complex *sNying thig* system of Gnoses in another way: in this al-
ternative model, the Three Gnoses are equated with the sole Body of
Reality as identified with the Primordial Base, the Five Gnoses of
Vajrayāna are equated with the Body of Enjoyment, and the Two
Gnoses⁴⁰ with the Body of Emanation.⁴¹

bsgyur du btub //.

³⁸ ZGP 75.5-6: *thog ma'i ka dag de yang / ngo bo stong pa'i ye shes chos sku / rang bzhin
gsal ba'i ye shes longs sku // thugs rje rang snang gi ye shes sprul sku / gsal stong rnam
par mi rtog pa'i ye shes ston ka'i nam mkha' rnam par dag pa lta bu'o //.*

³⁹ ZGP 90.3-5: *gdod ma'i gzhi ngo bo rang bzhin thugs rje gsum gyi ngo bo stong gsal
spros pa dang bral ba des chos sku'i gzhi byed do // rang bzhin 'od gsal snang stong chen
po des longs sku'i gzhi byed do // thugs rje ma 'gags rig pa dang bcas pa des sprul sku'i
gzhi byed do //.*

⁴⁰ In this context, the Two Gnoses are the knowledge of phenomena “as they are” (*ji
lta ba*), and “as many as they are” (*ji snyed pa*), as qualifications of the omniscience
of the Body of Emanation.

⁴¹ Achard 1999: 154-155. See Higgins 2013: 110, for a table of the complex presenta-
tion of the *sNying thig* analysis of Gnosis in the *tantra*-s of the *Mu tig phreng ba*

But in the all-encompassing model of the Three Gnoses equated with the Three Bodies, the Five Gnoses can be subsumed under the Nature as well as other fivefold categories:⁴²

In the Nature, being the ground for their apparition, the Five Bodies, Five Families, Five Gnoses, Five Energies, Five Wisdoms, and Five Lights remain spontaneously accomplished.

Such overlapping classifications create a potentially infinite network of cross-references and significations.⁴³ The relation of Essence, Nature, and the manifestation of the Five Gnoses characterizes the next passage.⁴⁴

In the dimension of the Essence, which is like the pure sky of autumn, and which is non-conceptual Gnosis, abides the Nature. The Nature shines as the knowing Gnosis like a surface of a clear mirror. [This] Gnosis dwelling in the Base, shining internally, remains as the omniscient Gnosis endowed with five characteristics: shining internally and free from conceptual construction, this Gnosis [abides as the Five Gnoses,] as follows.

- [1] Since the Essence is empty and changeless, it abides as the great Gnosis of the Realm of Reality (*chos dbyings*: *dharmadhātu*).
- [2] Since the Nature shines and the ground for manifestation is unobstructed, [it abides as] the great mirror-like Gnosis.
- [3] Since dualistic grasp of mere self-appearing Buddha-Bodies and Gnoses sinks into the realm [of reality], [it abides as] the great Gnosis of equality.
- [4] Since the aspect of knowing shines internally without mixing up whatever objects are knowable, [it abides as] the great Gnosis of discernment.
- [5] Since it timelessly abides as the ground of the spon-

and *sGra thal 'gyur*. See also the synthetic table at the end of the present paper.

⁴² *Thod rgal gyi rgyab yig nyi zla gza' skar* 423.4-5: *rang bzhin la 'char gzhi'i tshul du sku lnga rigs lnga ye shes lnga rlung lnga / shes rab lnga 'od lnga lhun grub tu gnas so //*.

⁴³ This is what Higgins (2013: 108) refers to as the “baroque intricacies” of the *sNying thig* analysis and typology of Gnoses.

⁴⁴ ZGP 78.2-79.1: *ngo bo ston ka'i nam mkha' dag pa lta bu / rnam par mi rtog pa'i ye shes kyi ngang na rang bzhin mkhyen pa'i ye shes su gsal ba me long dag pa'i ngos lta bu gzhi gnas kyi ye shes nang gsal du thams cad mkhyen pa'i ye shes mtshan nyid lnga ldan du bzhugs pa ni / nang gsal spros pa dang bral ba'i ye shes de yang / ngo bo stong la 'gyur ba med pas chos kyi dbyings kyi ye shes / rang bzhin gsal la 'char gzhi mi 'gags pas me long lta bu'i ye shes / rang snang gyi sku dang ye shes tsaṃ la yang gnyis bcas kyi 'dzin pa dbyings su nub pas mnyam pa nyid kyi ye shes / shes bya gang la yang ma 'dres par mkhyen cha nang du gsal bas so sor rtogs pa'i ye shes / don gnyis lhun gyis grub pa'i gzhi mar ye gdod ma nas bzhugs pas bya ba nan tan gyi ye shes chen por bzhugs so //*.

taneous accomplishment of the two benefits, [it abides as] the great Gnosis of persistent action.

Here we see that the Nature, associated with knowing and Clarity, abides in the Essence, characterized with non-conceptuality, Emptiness, and permanence. The Essence is thus given ontological predominance, as its association with the Body of Reality in contrast to the Formal Bodies clearly shows. The notion of Gnosis is present at both levels, and it is at the level of Nature, that the diffraction of the Five Gnoses appears. But the first of these Five Gnoses, the Gnosis of the *Dharmadhātu*, remains attached to the ontological level of the Essence or Body of Reality. So we may say that the relation between Essence and Nature is that of the Gnosis of the *Dharmadhātu* with the four other Gnoses.⁴⁵

From another perspective, the definition of the Three Gnoses of *rDzogs chen* as the pre-existence of the *trikāya* within the Primordial Base is also extended to the categories of the Buddha's Body, Speech and Mind (*sku gsung thugs*), associated respectively with Essence, Nature and Compassion.⁴⁶

3. The Three Gnoses as the Source of Manifestation

The primordial Base (*ye gzhi*), whether it is recognized or not, becomes either the "basis of freedom" (*grol gzhi*) or the "basis of illusion" (*'khrul gzhi*). And in both cases, the Three Gnoses remain the underlying principles. As it is said:⁴⁷

⁴⁵ The four other Gnoses are found in classical Yogācāra where they are the transformation of the eight consciousnesses: the mirror-like Gnosis (*adarśajñāna*) is the transformation of the eighth consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*), the Gnosis of equality (*samatājñāna*) of the seventh consciousness (*kliṣṭa-manas*), the Gnosis of discernment (*pratyavekṣanājñāna*) of the sixth consciousness (*mano-vijñāna*) and the Gnosis of persistent action (*krtyānuṣṭhānājñāna*) of the five sensory consciousnesses. The idea of *rDzogs chen* is that these Five Gnoses are actually preexisting within the Base, and that the eight consciousnesses are their degradation.

⁴⁶ ThChDz 154a5: *thog ma'i dbyings gzhon nu bum pa sku'i nang na ngo bo skur gnas pa / rang bzhin gsung du gnas pa / thugs rje thugs su gnas pa /*. "Inside of the primordial realm, the Youthful Vase Body, the Essence remains as Buddha-Body, the Nature remains as Buddha-Speech, and the Compassion remains as Buddha-Mind."

⁴⁷ ZGP 90.5-91.1: *sKu'i rgyud za 'og ber khyim gyi le'u las / rtogs te sangs rgyas pa'i dus na'ang ngo bo rang bzhin thugs rje gsum las ma 'das so // 'khrul te 'khor bar 'khyams pa'i dus na'ang ngo bo rang bzhin thugs rje gsum las ma 'das so // zhes gsungs so //*. This being so, even our current experience is included within the Three Gnoses. It is found repetitively in Klong chen pa like in ZGP 172.6: *ma dag pa'i dus na'ang ngo bo rang bzhin thugs rje gsum las ma 'das te /*. "Even at the time of impurity, one does not go beyond Essence, Nature, and Compassion."

Even at the time of realization and subsequent Buddhahood, one does not go beyond the three [aspects of] Essence, Nature, and Compassion.

Even at the time of illusion and subsequent wandering into cyclic existence, one does not go beyond the three [aspects of] Essence, Nature, and Compassion.

But the Three Gnoses, not recognized as such, become the ground for the “three ignorances.”⁴⁸

In dependence to Awareness (*rig pa*), there are the three ignorances (*ma rig pa*).

- [1] Non-recognizing the non-conceptual aspect of the Essence is the “ignorance of the single identity.”
- [2] Not knowing as Nature [’s self-manifestation] the radiance of Nature manifested into Light, is the ignorance of the co-emergence.
- [3] Not knowing Compassion to be Self-Awareness (*rang rig*) is the discriminative ignorance.

They form the first cause of bewilderment.

In another quotation, Klong chen pa explains the ignorance of the Essence as the ignorance itself, then Nature makes the objects of ignorance, and Compassion its conditions.⁴⁹ The apparition of ignorance does not appear at the level of the Essence, which remains utterly pure and undefiled, but in the mode of Nature, with the dynamic power (*rtsal*) of the Base, and the question whether it is recognized or not by Pure Awareness (*rig pa*) as the own manifestation of the Base.⁵⁰ We can read.⁵¹

⁴⁸ *Thod rgal gyi rgyab yig nyi zla gza’ skar* 427.6-428.1: *de’ang rig pa la ltos pa’i ma rig pa gsum ste / ngo bo mi rtog pa’i cha ngo ma shes pas bdag nyid gcig pa’i ma rig pa / rang bzhin ’od du gsal ba rang bzhin du ma shes pas lhan cig skyes pa’i ma rig pa / thugs rje rang rig tu ma shes pas kun tu brtags pa’i ma rig pas ’khrul pa’i dang po’i rgyu byas /*. See also Higgins (2013: 71-72) and Achard (2008: 81-82), on the three types of ignorance.

⁴⁹ ZGP 122.2-3: *ngo bo rang bzhin thugs rje gsum gyi mtshan nyid ma shes shing / ngo bo ma rig pa dngos / rang bzhin gyis yul / thugs rjes rkyen byas nas / khamis gsum gyi sems can gyis sdig pa sbu tsam zhig ma byas par ’khor bar ’khyams te /*. The four conditions (*rkyen bzhi*) of ignorance are (1) the causal condition (*rgyu’i rkyen*) made by the union of the three types of ignorance; 2) the objective condition of the objects (*dmigs pa’i skyen*), the appearances perceived as external objects; (3) the subjective condition (*bdag pa’i rkyen*) which is the reification of the ego; 4) the present condition (*lta da’i rkyen*) which is their conjunction in the present state of bewilderment. See Achard, *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ See Achard 2008: in particular 76-78 on this matter.

⁵¹ ZGP 73.6-74.2: *Thal ’gyur las / ngo bo ka dag ye shes la // ma rig pa zhes srid med pas // gcig dang gnyis zhes grangs med do // gang du ma phye chig chod la // ye shes tsam du*

In the Essence, which is the Gnosis of Primordial Purity, there is no possibility for “ignorance.” Thus, there is no enumeration such as “one” and “two”. It is not divisible, decisively one, and there is nothing established as merely Gnosis.

“Nature, Gnosis of Spontaneous Accomplishment,” is unborn and unobstructed, and does not give thought on anything. Since it has no ascertainment of objects, dynamic power and qualities are unobstructed. It arises as a simple display. Therefore, it is the basis of various expressions.

Here we find an interesting tension between the definition of the Essence as the Gnosis of Primordial Purity, while at the same time refuting the fact that mere Gnosis could be established as such. According to this quotation, the dynamic power (*rtsal*) is a property of the Nature or Gnosis of Spontaneous Accomplishment. Nevertheless, in another source each of the Three Gnoses displays a specific dynamic power. In this way, they form the threefold matrix of the entire manifestation and the underlying structure behind the veils of illusion. In connection with the problem of the manifestation of the Base (*gzhi snang*),⁵² Klong chen pa explains thus how the world manifests from the “three dynamic powers” (*rtsal gsum*):⁵³

From the dimension of the Base arises the “manifestation of the Base”. It is [composed of] the three dynamic powers of the Base.

The dynamic power of Essence is the field, which provides space, the dimension of non-conceptual space itself.

The dynamic power of Nature is the Five Colours, which arise distinctively as the self-radiance of Gnosis.

grub pa med // rang bzhin lhun grub ye shes zhes // mi skye mi 'gag cir mi dgongs // yul dag nges pa med pa'i phyir // rtsal dang yon tan 'gags med pas // rol pa tsam du snang ba las // sna tshogs brjod pa'i gzhi ma'o // zhes pa dang /. Cf. sGra thal 'gyur 490.6-491.4: ngo bo ka dag ye shes la // ma rig pa zhes srid ming med // gcig dang gnyis kyi grangs med pa'o // rtags pas yod med grub pa med // gang du ma phy'e chos nyid las // ye shes tsam du grub pa med // tshig med brjod pas grub pa med // mtha' la mi gnas rang rig dag // brjod 'dzin ming gis mtha' zad pa'o // rgyu med rkyen gyis grangs med las // gnyis snang yul dang yul can med // mtshan nyid gang du phy'e ba med // yul rkyen rags pa rang zad pa'o // ye nas med pas dag pas dag // 'khrul rtog 'gags pas cing [sic, read ci] mi mdzad // ma skyes pas na 'gags stongs so // rang bzhin lhun grub ye shes zhes // mi skye mi 'gag ci mi dgongs // yul dag nges pa med phyir ro // rtsa [sic, read rtsal] dang yon tan 'gag med pas // rol pa tsam du snang ba las // sna tshogs rdzogs pa'i gzhi ma'o //

⁵² On this topic, see Achard (2005).

⁵³ *Thod rgal gyi yang yig nam mkha' klong gsal* 79.5-80.1: *gzhi yi ngang las gzhi snang shar // de yang gzhi yi rtsal gsum ste // ngo bo'i rtsal ni go 'byed yul // rtog med nam mkha'i ngang nyid du // rang bzhin rtsal ni kha dog luga // ye shes rang gdangs phyed par shar // thugs rje'i rtsal ni shes rig tsam // yul 'byed nus pa'i tshul du shar // de ni grol 'khrul gnyis kyi gzhi // nges pa med pa'i lhun grub bo //*

The dynamic power of Compassion is mere knowledge and awareness, which arise as the capacity to differentiate objects. This is the ground of both freedom and illusion: it is the Spontaneous Accomplishment [in which those two ways are] indeterminate.

Here we may say that the Three Gnoses are envisioned from the “perspective” or mode of Spontaneous Accomplishment. From the perspective of the Youthful Vase Body, or Primordial Purity, or Essence, there is no consideration of either freedom or illusion. But from the perspective of the “manifestations of the Base” (*gzhi snang*), or Spontaneous Accomplishment, or Nature, the two possibilities of freedom and illusion emerge simultaneously because it is indeterminate (*nges med*). Here the dynamic power of Compassion is defined as “mere knowledge and awareness” (*shes rig tsam*) in reference to the cognicizing of objects. In contradistinction, the dynamic power of Essence remains purely non-conceptual, but it provides the space for the emergence of objects. The generation of space from the Essence is explained further in the following:⁵⁴

- [1] The impartial and empty self-radiance of the Essence makes the illusory ground of the field opening into the whole empty space of the external field.
- [2] The intelligent, empty, and subtle [self-radiance] of the Essence makes internally the field of the universal ground (*kun gzhi, ālaya*), the illusory field supporting all the eight collections [of consciousnesses (*rnam shes: vijñāna*)].

Here the Essence has two aspects, both being empty and luminous at the same time. But the emphasis of the first is impartiality. In the context of the non-recognition of this Essence as it is, it provides then the ground for the illusion of the external space. The second aspect, with an emphasis on its cognitive aspect, provides in the same context of illusion, the “universal basis,” explained as the ground for the collection of eight consciousnesses of the *Yogācāra* School. This “universal basis” (*kun gzhi*) is thus clearly distinguished from the “primordial Base” (*ye gzhi*) of *rDzogs chen*.

The connection of those two levels is that the Essence acts in the delusive mode as the receptacle or container, either external with physical space, or internal with the “store-consciousness.” Then the contents, the bodies of beings, and the manifestation of the four ele-

⁵⁴ ZGP 87.5-6: *ngo bo ris med stong pa'i rang mdangs kyi [sic, read kyis] phyir yul nam mkha' stong pa kun gyi go skabs 'byed pa'i yul gyi 'khrul gzhi byed la / ngo bo rig stong phra mos nang du kun gzhi'i yul tshogs brgyad kun gyi rten byed pa'i 'khrul yul byed do//.*

ments constituting them, is provided by the Nature.⁵⁵

From the clear radiance of Nature, luminous Nature, two lights appear.

- [1] The light of the illuminating Nature constitutes inside the ground for the illusion of the body with the patterns of colours and characteristics.
- [2] From the [first] appears [the second:] the reflexive light. It provides outside the field in which the four elements manifest individually.

According to these two quotations we can see that Essence and Nature, or the interplay of Emptiness and Clarity, creates the world and its beings, the “container” and the “vital essences” (*snod bcud*). We find here the *rDzogs chen* conception that the phenomenal world is created by light. Seen through the prism of nescience, light creates the illusion of the body. And through the degradation of this light into reflections, the field of the four elements is produced. If light creates the illusion of the body, we may keep in mind that in the cosmology of *rDzogs chen*, the body is first a body of light (*'od kyi lus*) before it becomes a body made of the four gross elements.⁵⁶ As such it is also associated with the life-energy.⁵⁷ In another passage presented in the next part,⁵⁸ Klong chen pa shows that the Five Gnoses produce through dynamic power (*rtsal*) the Five Lights, their own radiances (*rang gdangs*), which then, due to the delusive function of grasping them as substantial become the five elements associated with their corresponding energies or vital forces, expressions of the dynamic power of Awareness.

⁵⁵ ZGP 87.6-88.2: *rang bzhin gsal mdangs 'od kyi rang bzhin las 'od gnyis snang ba'i rang bzhin gyi 'od kyi [sic, read kyis] nang du lus kyi 'khrul gzhi kha dog dang mtshan ma ris can du byed la / de las snang ba gzugs brnyan gyi 'od kyis phyir 'byung ba bzhi so sor snang ba'i yul byed do //*.

⁵⁶ On this cosmological process, see Achard 2008: 83-90.

⁵⁷ ThChDz 276b3-5: *ngo bo skur bzhugs pas rang ngo na mi gsal yang phyir snang sku'i 'char gzhi ma 'gags par rang gsal / rang bzhin 'od lnga'i 'char gzhi srog rlung yan lag bzhi gsung gi snying por ye gnas / thugs rje thugs rang byung rig pa'i snying po mkhyen pa gnyis kyi ye shes su lhun gyis grub pas / sku dang ye shes 'du 'bral med pa'i dgongs pa las 'pho 'gyur med par bzhugs so //*. “The Essence, remaining as the [matrix] of the Body, does not shine in its own essence, but shines by itself as the unobstructed basis of the arising of the Body which appears outside. The Nature which is the basis of the arising of the Five Lights and the vital energy with its four parts, remains timelessly as the matrix (*snying po: garbha*) of Speech. Compassion, the matrix of Mind, self-originated Awareness, is spontaneously accomplished as the Wisdom of the two kinds of Omniscience. Therefore, they remain without moving or changing from the Enlightened Intent in which the Bodies and Gnoses are inseparably united.”

⁵⁸ See note 73 below for the full Tibetan extract and translation.

Another quotation synthesizes all this cosmological process according to the Three Gnoses:⁵⁹

Within the aspect of Essence is the field empty of anything whatsoever.
In it, the mere light of Nature and the light of [its] reflection arise from the aspect of Nature.
From the aspect of Compassion, the subtle knowledge grasps the objects of analysis.
Thereby, the body is accomplished from the light of Nature. The outer world with earth, water, fire, wind, space, and their colours is accomplished from the five colours of [the light of] reflection.

So the physical body and the elements of the world all derive from the lights arising from Nature, within the background expanse, or field of possibilities, provided by the Essence, and while the Compassion, Mind-Lord, apprehends the objects. In another classification, Klong chen pa determines Essence, Nature and Compassion as the causes for the illusion of respectively ignorance, objects and body, and dualistic mind.⁶⁰

The Five Lights [of Nature] made the basis for the illusion of the objects and the body.
By Compassion the basis for the illusion of the dualistic mind arose.
By Essence the basis for the illusion of ignorance appeared.

But because in this process of degradation, the underlying frame of the Three Gnoses is never interrupted, the other possibility of their manifestation into the three dimensions of Buddhahood still remains in essence. Klong chen pa writes:⁶¹

One initially deviates from the Essence, Nature, and Compassion. So, even at the present time, one's own body, as the essence of these three, remains the *maṇḍala* of the Victorious, beyond meeting and parting from the Three Buddha-Bodies.

⁵⁹ ZGP 120.5-121.1: ngo bo'i cha la [sic, read las] ci yang ma yin pa'i stong pa'i yul la rang bzhin gyi cha nas rang bzhin dang gzugs brnyan 'od tsam du shar / thugs rje'i cha las shes pa phra mos dpyod byed yul la 'dzin pas / rang bzhin gyi 'od las lus grub / gzugs brnyan gyi kha dog lnga las phyi rol gyi sa chu me rlung nam mkha'i kha dog dang bcas par grub /.

⁶⁰ Thod rgal gyi yang yig nam mkha' klong gsal 80.5: 'od lngas yul lus 'khrul gzhi byas // thugs rjes sems kyi 'khrul gzhi shar // ngo bo [sic, read bos] ma rig 'khrul gzhi byung //.

⁶¹ ZGP 173.3-4: thog mar ngo bo rang bzhin thugs rje gsum las 'khrul pas / da lta yang de gsum gyi ngo bor rang lus rgyal ba'i dkyil 'khor sku gsum 'du 'bral med par gnas te /.

And as a central topic of *Man ngag sde* teachings, this enlightened potential remains at the “heart” or center of a specific subtle anatomy,⁶² where all the three aspects of the Three Gnoses can be envisioned as follows:⁶³

The Great Gnosis [remains] in the palace of the pure channel of light in the midst of the heart.
The Essence remains as the Buddha-Bodies, thus the major and minor marks of the Five Lights are perfected.
The Nature remains as light, thus the appearances of the Five Gnoses are immeasurable.
The Compassion remains as Pure Awareness (*rig pa*), thus knowledge shines innerly.

This quotation may also refer particularly to the visionary practices of Direct Transcendence where Essence, Nature and Compassion are respectively perceived as Five Buddha-Bodies, Five Lights and Gnoses.⁶⁴

4. Reflections on “Compassion”: the Heart of *rDzogs chen* Gnoseology

In all the sources that we have presented until now, “Compassion” (*thugs rje*) appears mainly as a cognitive function, as the honorific word *thugs*, the “enlightened Mind/Heart,” indicates. In the following quotation, the Three Gnoses are associated with the enlightened Body, Speech and Mind. In this context “Compassion” is associated to Mind. Here the correspondence between *thugs rje* and *thugs* becomes almost tautological:⁶⁵

Essence remains as the Body and is changeless.
From the light of Nature, Speech itself arises.
Compassion (*thugs rje*), being the Mind (*thugs*), remains as Pure Awareness (*rig pa*).

⁶² Within the central channel common to tantrism, the *Man ngag sde* system adds within it this “pure light channel.” In its center, its “palace,” the Gnosis is said to reside. On this system of specific channels and their visionary manifestations, see Achard 1999: 129-136.

⁶³ ThChDz 248a6: *ye shes chen po de snying dbus 'od rtsa dag pa'i gzhal yas na ngo bo skur gnas pas 'od lnga'i mtshan dpe rdzogs / rang bzhin 'od du gnas pas ye shes lnga'i snang ba tshad med / thugs rje rig par gnas pas mkhyen pa nang na gsal ba'o //*.

⁶⁴ On this system of correlations see Achard: 118-120.

⁶⁵ *mThar thug don gyi snying po* 296.4-297.1: *ngo bo skur gnas 'pho 'gyur med // rang bzhin 'od las gsung nyid 'char // thugs rje thugs te rig par gnas //*.

But, because of its association with the Body of Emanation, the Gnosis of *thugs rje* is also clearly associated with the compassionate forms of salvific activities, matching the diverse circumstances of the deluded beings. In the following quotation, we find the semantic network of Compassion as benefiting others:⁶⁶

Because Compassion remains universally, the benefit of others appears by itself.

We may thus say that in this context, the term *thugs rje* integrates those different levels of significations. Whether this *rDzogs chen* term was a Tibetan translation from Sanskrit, from the language of Zhang Zhung, or a pure Tibetan composition, we must be sure, that because of its centrality in the *rDzogs chen* view, the term was carefully chosen. Indeed, *thugs rje* is the heart of *rDzogs chen* gnoseology since it is the aspect that gives a gnoseological function to the whole. As we can read:⁶⁷

Because Compassion knows as Mind, the knowing of the Three Gnoses is unobstructed.

Again and again, the core principle of Compassion is its association with Pure Awareness.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ ZGP 461.6-462.1: *ngo bo stong pas spros pa'i mtha' las 'das / rang bzhin gsal bas longs sku'i 'char gzhi ma 'gags / thugs rje kun khyab tu bzhugs pas gzhan don ngang gis 'byung ba ste / chos sku longs sku sprul sku gsum lhun grub chen por bzhugs so //*. "The Essence, being empty, is beyond all conceptual constructions. The Nature, being clear, is the unobstructed basis of the apparition of the Enjoyment Body. Because Compassion remains universally, the benefit of others appears by itself. The three Bodies, of Reality, Enjoyment and Emanation, remain in the great Spontaneous accomplishment."

⁶⁷ *sNyan brgyud kyi rgyab chos chen mo zab don gnad kyi me long* 207.2-3: *ngo bo chos skur gnas pas gzugs sku gnyis kyi rten byed / rang bzhin gsung du yod pas 'od gsal gyi klong na chos nyid kyi rang sgrar rang snang / thugs rje thugs su mkhyen pas ye shes gsum gyi mkhyen pa ma 'gags pa'o //*. "The Essence, remaining as the Body of Reality, supports the two Formal Bodies. The Nature, existing as Speech, appears by itself as self-resounding of reality in the vast expanse of radiant light. Because Compassion knows as Mind, the knowing of Three Gnoses is unobstructed."

⁶⁸ ZGP 82.3-6: *thog ma'i thugs rje nang gsal gyi rig pa de yang / ngo bo rnam par mi rtoḡ pa sprin med pa'i nam mkha' lta bu chos sku / rang bzhin me long g.ya' dag pa ltaḡ thams cad mkhyen pa'i ngang las / rnam pa thams cad mkhyen pa'i 'char gzhi ma 'gags par 'od gsal ba longs sku / thugs rje nang gsal du thams cad mkhyen pa'i ye shes rang rig pa'i rgyal por bzhugs pa sprul pa'i sku rig stong 'gyur ba med pa chos nyid la mnyam par bzhag pa lta bur bzhugs so //*. The translation part omitted in the main text is: "Specifically the Essence, non-conceptuality, like a cloudless sky, is the Body of Reality. The Nature, like a mirror freed from rust, shines brilliantly as the unobstructed basis for the manifestation of the distinctive omniscience within the state of

The primordial Compassion is the Pure Awareness of inner luminosity [...] The Compassion, the omniscient Gnosis shining innerly, remains as the King of Self-Awareness, and is the Emanation Body. It is aware and empty, changeless, and remains like the meditative equipoise in Reality.

The importance of this gnoseological definition of Compassion is directly addressed by Klong chen pa when he refutes the objection of the non-existence of Gnosis in Compassion:⁶⁹

Someone, who misunderstands the explanation of Compassion as unobstructed, all-pervasive, and non-conceptual, proclaims that Gnosis is interrupted [in Compassion, i.e. that Compassion is devoid of Gnosis]. But, if there were no ground for the manifestation of Gnosis [within Compassion], a Buddha would not have any knowing aspect. And it would follow that [a Buddha] would be an inert void like space or like an inanimate substance.

This discussion is connected to the debate of the existence of Gnosis in the state of a Buddha. And like the Base of *rDzogs chen*, a Buddha is definitely not an inert void for Klong chen pa. The two aspects of Compassion, the cognitive aspect and the *stricto sensu* compassionate aspect, are connected in an interesting manner in the following quotation of the *Tantra of the Penetration of Sound*:⁷⁰

Within Compassion which is all-pervasive Gnosis, inactivity is the gate of various appearances. It appears like Buddha's activities and is intrinsically perfect. From the nature of the empty Body of Reality, the aspect of the perfection of Gnosis as knowledge [i.e. Compassion] arises spontaneously to sentient beings. If Compassion did not exist, the umbilical cord between cyclic existence and extinction would be severed. Therefore, through knowledge [i.e. Compassion] [the Base] is aware and clear.

omniscience. It is the Enjoyment Body."

⁶⁹ TshDDz 806.2-3: *thugs rje 'gags med kun khyab spros bral du bshad pa la 'khrul nas kha cig gis ye shes rgyun chad du 'dod de / ye shes kyi 'char gzhi med na sangs rgyas kyi mkhyen cha med pas phyang chad nam mkha' lta bu'am yang na bems po lta bur 'gro ste/*

⁷⁰ ZGP 80.5-81.1: *Thal 'gyur las / thugs rje kun khyab ye shes las // mi mdzad sna tshogs 'char ba'i sgo // mdzad pa ltar snang ngo bor rdzogs // chos sku stong pa'i rang bzhin las // ye shes mkhyen pa rdzogs pa'i cha // shugs kyis sems can rnams la 'char // 'di med 'khor 'das lte chad pas // mkhyen pas rig cing gsal ba'o // zhes so //*. Cf. sGra thal 'gyur 491.6-7: *thugs rje kun khyab ye shes las // mi mdzad sna tshogs 'char ba'i sgo // mdzad pa ltar snang ngo bo rdzogs // chos sku stong pa'i rang bzhin las // ye shes mkhyen pa rdzogs pa'i cha // shugs kyis sems can rnams la 'char // de med 'khor 'das de chad pas // mkhyen pas rig cing gsal ba'o //*.

The Compassion is said to be “inactive,” an epithet for the spontaneous activity: it is the gate for various manifestations, appearing like the Buddha’s activities. Thus it is said to be perfect in itself, encompassing all activities or manifestations while not being limited or exhausted by them. But we need to consider here the insistence on the gnoseological dimension. When it is said that Compassion arises spontaneously to sentient beings, it is especially defined as the aspect of Gnosis or knowledge. So the traditional *Mahāyāna* Buddhology/soteriology of the spontaneous and compassionate activities of a Buddha is here reinterpreted in a different framework. What appear to sentient beings are not only salvific actions, but more fundamentally the Gnosis itself. The two levels may be integrated according to the understanding that the ultimate salvation is through the recognition of this Gnosis, and the supreme compassion is the revelation or teaching of this single truth of *rDzogs chen*. We should also note that this Compassion is explicitly situated between the level of the Absolute, the Body of Reality, in which it originates, and the level of sentient beings, to which it appears. Even more, it is defined as the “umbilical cord” connecting *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*.⁷¹ Without Compassion, they would be totally separated, and there would be no possibility to be delivered from *saṃsāra* and attain *nirvāṇa*.

Similarly to Gnosticism which was criticized by Neoplatonism regarding the fact that it considered Gnosis to be the sole means of salvation, thus denying the importance of virtues, in Tibet, Buddhist instantaneism (represented by Chinese *Chan*) was criticized by the gradualist approach (represented by Indian *Yogācāra-Madhyamaka*) for denying the importance of the practice of virtues related to the level of conventionnal truth. Thus the orthodoxy/orthopraxy became in Tibet the View of the Two Truths, related to the Two Accumulations of Gnosis and virtues, and culminating into the Fruit of the Two Buddha-Bodies.

So in this context, we may consider that the choice of Tibetan *rDzogs chen* authors to translate the Gnostic aspect of the Absolute with the term *thugs rje*, used otherwise to translate *karuṇā*, was particularly skillful. Because the view of *rDzogs chen* is especially the indivisibility of *ka dag* and *lhun grub*, Gnosis and merits being already perfected in the Natural State. Thus Wisdom and Compassion, or Wisdom and Methods are also preexistingly united. In this respect, we shall also remind that the key term of Mahāyānist universal benevolence and soteriology, the Enlightened Mind (*byang chub kyi*

⁷¹ Similarly, Rong zom pa named the fact that a Buddha’s Gnosis is not separated from the *Dharmadhātu* as one link between Buddhas and sentient beings. See Al-mogi (2009: 232) for references.

sems: bodhicitta) has also been used in *rDzogs chen* texts in a different framework, being equated with the Self-Occurring Gnosis (*rang byung ye shes: svayambhū-jñāna*). But again, what is implied in the *rDzogs chen* view is that the different levels of *bodhicitta*, relative or absolute, are already integrated within the contemplation of all the aspects of the Base: empty Essence, clear Nature, and all-pervasive Compassion. Through the terms *byang chub kyi sems* or *thugs rje*, all the semantic network of compassion, love, benevolence, kindness, mercy, good heart, responsiveness, grace, felt resonance, is integrated as the inherent qualities already present in the Natural State.

The polysemy of the word *thugs rje* points out at the core of the *rDzogs chen* view, the all-encompassing heart, in which knowledge and compassion are inseparable: the “Intelligence of the Heart.” Moreover the definition of *thugs rje* as *rig pa*, Pure Awareness, places also *thugs rje* at the center of *rDzogs chen* soteriology since it is through *rig pa* that the Basis is recognized, and through *ma rig pa* that it is mistaken.

In many extracts presented here, *thugs rje* is explicitly defined as *rig pa*, and not as the common source of *rig pa* and *ma rig pa*. But *ma rig pa* is itself based on *rig pa*. It is at the level of the dynamic power (*rtsal*) of Compassion that the problem of the apparition of ignorance is fully evident:⁷²

At the time of the emergence of the Base’s manifestations, the dynamic power of Compassion appears naturally as knowledge, clear and cognizant, and the capacity to investigate objects. From the perspective of the non-recognition of its own nature, it appears concomitantly with the three ignorances.

In an interesting passage,⁷³ Klong chen pa describes how illusion or

⁷² TshDDz 829.1-2: *gzhi snang du shar dus thugs rje'i rtsal shes pa gsal rig yul dpyod nus su rang shar ba de rang ngo ma shes pa la ltos nas ma rig pa gsum dang mtshungs ldan du shar te /*.

⁷³ ZGP 126.1-127.2: *stong pa'i ngang las ye shes kyi rtsal shar bas 'od lnga byung / de la ma 'gags pa'i rig pa yod pas 'od lnga la 'dzin pa byung / 'dzin pa de la rlung zhes bya ste / nang gsal gyi thugs rje'i rtsal phyir 'phros pa yin no // de yang snang ba'i yul 'od lnga la thugs rje'i rtsal 'dzin pas tha dad du gzung bas 'byung ba rags par ji ltar grub na / so sor rtogs pa'i ye shes kyi rang gdangs 'od dmar po de la dngos 'dzin du 'khrul pas me dmar po byung / de la rlung rig pa'i rtsal gyis drod byung / yang mnyam pa nyid kyi rang gdangs 'od ser por gsal ba de la 'dzin pa skyes pas sa ser po byung / me long lta bu'i ye shes kyi rang gdangs 'od dkar por shar ba la 'dzin pa skyes pas chu dkar po byung / bya ba grub pa'i ye shes kyi rang gdangs 'od ljang gu shar ba la 'dzin pa skyes pas rlung ljang gu byung / 'byung ba nam mkha' ni ye gdod ma nas ye shes dang mnyam du gnas te 'pho 'gyur med do // ye shes kyi rang gdangs 'od rnam la 'dzin pa skyes pas sa chu me rlung bzhi byung / de dag la rig rtsal rlung gis khyab pas las kun byed do // de ltar ye shes lnga la 'dzin pa skyes pas 'byung ba dngos su grub bo // de yang thog mar ma rig*

ignorance causes the extraversion of the dynamic power of Compassion. In itself, the dynamic power of Compassion is defined as inner clarity (*nang gsal*). Its extraversion is due to a grasping. It is then called “energy” (*rlung*: *prāṇa*), the energy of the dynamic power of Compassion. This grasping takes as its objects the self-radiances (*rang gdangs*) of the Five Gnoses: the Five Lights. The Five Lights become grasped as substances and in this way the five gross elements appear. Moreover, this grasping or energy remains as the pervading force which animates the elements and combines them all together in order to form the universe and beings. Energy is also differentiated into the respective energies of the five elements. This grasping represents thus a degradation of the dynamic power of Compassion. This primordial shift represented by grasping and extraversion is even called the “dynamic power of ignorance” (*ma rig pa'i rtsal*). This passage also shows the relation between Compassion and Nature, with its fivefold objects and their transformation as described above.

Nevertheless, the dynamic power of Pure Awareness is itself pure. In the case of a Buddha, it is defined as self-recognition, the source of the various facets of omniscience, which are the pure aspects of the fivefold radiance of Nature. In this mode, even outward manifestation remains also pure: it benefits beings as the two kinds of omni-

pa'i rtsal gyis bskyed pas 'byung ba lnga la so so'i rtsal byung nas / de rnams gcig tu 'dzom pas snod bcud kyi 'jig rten chags te /.

“From the empty state, the dynamic power of Gnosis appearing, the Five Lights emerge. In this, unobstructed Pure Awareness being present, the grasping of the Five Lights appears. This grasping is called the energy (*rlung*: *prāṇa*). It is the diffusion outside of the dynamic power of Compassion which is [itself] inner clarity. Moreover, because of the grasping [= the extraversion] of the dynamic power of Compassion, the field of appearances, the Five Lights are grasped individually. Due to this, how are established the gross elements? [1] Because of the illusion of grasping as a substance the self-radiance of the Gnosis of discernment, fire, which is red, is born. In this, the energy of the dynamic power of Pure Awareness produces the heat. [2] Then, because of the generation of the grasping of the self-radiance of [the Gnosis of] equality, illuminating as yellow light, earth, which is yellow, is born. [3] Because of the generation of the grasping of the self-radiance of the mirror-like Gnosis appearing as white light, water, which is white, is born. [4] Because of the generation of the grasping of the self-radiance of the Gnosis of persistent action appearing as green light, wind, which is green, is born. [5] The element of space abides together with Gnoses from the origin; it is changeless. Because of the generation of the grasping of Lights, self-radiances of Gnoses, the four elements, earth, water, fire, wind are born. They, being pervaded by the energy of the dynamic power of Pure Awareness, perform all actions. Thus, because of the generation of the grasping of the Five Gnoses, the elements are established as substances. Moreover, because at the origin, they are generated by the dynamic power of ignorance (*ma rig pa'i rtsal*), in the elements, the respective [energies of] dynamic powers are born. Then they gather together as a whole, so the world, the receptacle and its contents, arises.”

science.⁷⁴

The dynamic power of Pure Awareness appears, illuminating internally, as the Five Gnoses of omniscience, and illuminating externally, as the [two] aspects of omniscience knowing [phenomena] as they are, and as many as they are.

5. The Structure of the Path

The two aspects of the Base, Primordial Purity and Spontaneous Accomplishment, even indivisible, are fully realized on the Path according to the two main practices of *Man ngag sde*: “Breakthrough” (*khregs chod*) and “Direct Transcendence” (*thod rgal*). Such a path is necessary because of the state of illusion and the deluded mode or degradation of dynamic power. So these two practices are connected to the two types of dynamic power emerging respectively from Primordial Purity and Spontaneous Accomplishment.⁷⁵

As for the path: since there are two aspects, namely, Primordial Purity and Spontaneous Accomplishment, there are also two dynamic powers: the moving mind and the body made by the elements, with materiality and objects.

Thus, in order to purify these two dynamic powers, there are two practices: Breakthrough (*khregs chod*) and Direct Transcendence (*thod rgal*).

The dynamic power of Primordial Purity produces the moving mind, the dualistic mind apprehending everything in terms of subject and object, and the dynamic power of the Spontaneous Accomplishment produces the body and objects. These elements correspond with the sources mentioned above in which the aspect of the Essence is connected to the production of the external space and the universal basis (basis of the dualistic mind comprising the eight consciousnesses) whereas the aspect of Nature is connected to the apparition of the illusion of the body and the elements.

In another passage, Klong chen pa describes these two dynamic powers and their creations but with special reference to Pure Aware-

⁷⁴ *Thod rgal gyi rgyab yig nyi zla gza' skar* 439.4-5: *rig pa'i rtsal ni / nang gsal thams cad mkhyen pa'i ye shes lnga dang / phyi gsal ji lta ba dang ji snyed pa mkhyen pa'i rnam par shar ro //*.

⁷⁵ *Bum pa'i brda don* 133.1-2: *lam yang ka dag lhun grub gnyis // gnas phyir de yi rtsal yang gnyis // gyur ba'i sems dang 'byung bzhi'i lus // gdos bcas yul dang bcas pa'o // de ltar rtsal gnyis sbyang ba'i phyir // nyams len khregs chod thod rgal gnyis //*.

ness.⁷⁶

The primordial state is twofold: appearance and Emptiness. From this perspective, the dynamic power (*rtsal*) of Pure Awareness is twofold: [1] the dynamic power of appearance and [2] the dynamic power of Emptiness.

[1] The dynamic power of appearance [produces] body and objects, and all variously appearing entities that arise. [All arise] as [the degradation of] the dynamic power of Spontaneous Accomplishment.

[2] The dynamic power of Emptiness [produces] the moving mind. It spreads variously without ground. If we look [at the moving mind] from the very [moment of its] simple spreading, it doesn't exist. It is self-occurring from the dynamic power of Primordial Purity.

Since good qualities arise as defects, these two dynamic powers make the conditions of the experience [of bewilderment]⁷⁷. There are two aspects that purify these two [dynamic powers]: Break-through and Direct Transcendence.

Pure Awareness forms a middle term between *ka dag* and *lhun grub*, Essence and Nature, and its dynamic powers are defined in correlation of those two poles. Moreover, it is also through the dynamic powers of Pure Awareness, that the qualities of *ka dag* and *lhun grub* are transformed into the defects of deluded experience.

We have seen that the illusions related to the aspects of Essence and Nature are purified through *khregs chod* and *thod rgal*. What about Compassion? Even if as Pure Awareness, it can be interpreted as a middle term, from another perspective, the importance of its cognitive function associates it more particularly with the purification of mind, and thus, to the practice of *khregs chod*. In this framework, the purification of the body, derived from Nature, is accomplished by the practice of *thod rgal*.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ *gSang ba bla med spyi babs* 284.1-285.1: *thog ma'i ngang las snang stong gnyis // de las rig pa'i rtsal yang gnyis // snang ba'i rtsal dang stong pa'i rtsal // snang ba'i rtsal ni lus dang yul // sna tshogs snang ba'i dngos kun shar // de yang lhun grub rtsal du'o // stong pa'i rtsal ni 'gyu ba'i sems // gzhi rtsa med pa sna tshogs 'phro // 'phros tsam nyid nas bltas na med // ka dag rtsal las rang byung ngo // yon tan skyon du shar bas na // rtsal 'di gnyis kyi mthong rkyen byas // de gnyis sbyong byed rnam pa gnyis // thod rgal dang ni khregs chod do //*

⁷⁷ On the four conditions, see note 50 above.

⁷⁸ *Bar do gnad kyi sgron me* 190.5-6: *khregs chod kyi sems sbyong thugs rje'i gnas lugs ngo shes par byed dgos / thod rgal gyis yul dang lus sbyong rang bzhin gyi gnas lugs shes par byed dgos /*. *Thod rgal* operates the purification and reintegration of the five elements in their pure origins: the Five Lights of Nature, thus transmuting the material body into the Fruit of the Rainbow Body ('*ja' lus*).

Through Breakthrough, one should purify the mind, that is to say recognize the Natural State of Compassion [=“Mind-Lord”].

Through Direct Transcendence, one should purify the objects and the body, that is to say understand the Natural State of Nature.

But with the general principle of indivisibility, each of the two practices of *khregs chod* and *thod rgal* fully comprehends the Three Gnoses. In *khregs chod*, it is the case since the Three Gnoses are the very description of the direct confrontation. And in *thod rgal*, their indivisibility manifests itself in the intensification of a visionary process that absorbs the whole individual and its universe of perception. As it is well demonstrated in Klong chen pa's writings:⁷⁹

As the sign of Essence, [one realizes] the absence of origination free from conceptual constructions.

As the sign of Nature, light shines in a variegated way.

As the sign of Compassion, knowledge arises as [the inseparability of] clarity and emptiness.

You must know that these very [three signs show that] in the midst of [one's own] heart, the Primordial Lord who is Changeless Light, abides within the Enlightened Intent in which the Three Bodies are inseparably united.

This indivisibility of *ka dag* and *lhun grub*, emptiness and light, is also described according to the integration of interior and exterior, where each aspect sustains the other along the process of the practice. This culminates in the realization of the “inseparability of the Expanse and Awareness” (*dbyings rig dbyer med*):⁸⁰

⁷⁹ sGron ma bzhi skor 95.5-96.1: ngo bo'i rtags su skye med spros pa dang bral ba la / rang bzhin gyi rtags su 'od sna tshogs su gsal zhiing / thugs rje'i rtags su shes pa gsal stong du 'char ba 'di kho na gdod ma'i mgon po 'od mi 'gyur ba snying gi dbus na sku gsum 'du 'bral med pa'i dgongs pa la bzhugs pa yin par shes par gyis shig.

⁸⁰ ThChDz 331b6-7: phyi 'od gsal la ltas [sic, read bltas] pas nang rnam rtoḡ dang bral te ris med mnyam par grol ba ni / ka dag gi rig gdangs dang / lhun grub kyi 'od gdangs gnyis phyi nang zung du 'brel bas / dbying rig 'du 'bral med pa'i dgongs pa zhes bya'o //. The topic of the inseparability of the Expanse and Awareness is expressed in the context of the visionary practice of *thod rgal* with the symbolic description of three “gazes”: TshDDz 1233.5-1234.3: smin mtshams kyi nam mkha' la mig gtad de shes pa ma yengs par blta ba ni dbyings dang rig pa'i lta stangs zhes bya'o // de'ang nam mkha' ni dbyings rnam dag gi sgron ma 'char ba'i gzhi yin pas der blta ba la dbyings kyi lta stangs zhes bya'o // shes pa ni rig pa'i rtsal yin pas de ma yengs na gdangs lu gu rgyud kyi snang ba 'char bas rig pa'i lta stangs zhes bya'o //. “Looking with an undistracted cognition, the eyes focused in the space between them is known as the gaze of the Expanse and Pure Awareness. Moreover, space being the basis of the apparition of the Lamp of the utterly pure Expanse, to look at it is called the gaze of the Expanse. Cognition being the dynamic power of Pure Awareness, without distraction and emerging as the appearance of the radiating strings of chains, it is

By means of seeing light externally, one is internally separated from conceptuality and released into the impartial equality. The radiant Awareness of Primordial Purity and the radiant Light of Spontaneous Accomplishment, inside and outside, being integrated, it is called “the Enlightened Intent in which Expanse and Awareness are inseparably united.”

Within the context of the visions of *thod rgal*, the Three Gnoses are also used to classify the different contents of visions, with various and overlapping systems of analogies, which also shows an ontological procession of the Three Gnoses. Here we find such a system, centered on the notion of Pure Awareness:⁸¹

The Pure Awareness of Emptiness abides as Clarity.
The Pure Awareness of the Clarity abides as Buddha-Bodies.
The Pure Awareness of the Buddha-Bodies abides as [the inseparability of] appearances and Emptiness.
Moreover, the Pure Awareness of the Base is the great Primordial Purity.
The Pure Awareness of Spontaneous Accomplishment is Bodies and Gnoses.
The Pure Awareness of Compassion is the unobstructed string of chains.⁸²

Again and again we find the correlation of *ka dag* and *lhun grub* with empty space and luminous appearances, with the continuous presence of Pure Awareness, rendered poetically by Klong chen pa in the following way:⁸³

From the great and timeless radiance of the pure Reality, which is the Primordial Basis endowed with the residence of Light, the Gnostic Energy endowed with the matrix (*snying po*, *garbha*) of Pure Awareness which is Compassion, moving out, inner luminosity manifested outside. In the space of Primordial Purity, the sun, moon, planets and stars of Spontaneous Accomplishment,

called the gaze of Pure Awareness.”

⁸¹ ZGP 82.1-3: *Don gsal me long las stong pa'i rig pa gsal bar gnas so // gsal ba'i rig pa sku ru gnas so // sku'i rig pa snang stong du gnas so // yang gzhi'i rig pa ka dag chen po yin / lhun grub kyi rig pa sku dang ye shes yin / thugs rje'i rig pa ma 'gags lu gu rgyud do // zhes bshad do //*. As we have discussed above, classical associations are Essence with Five Buddha-Bodies, Nature with Five Lights, and Compassion with Five Gnoses (cf. Achard 1999: 118-120).

⁸² A specific visionnary content of *thod rgal* also called “vajra chains” (*rdo rje lu gu*).

⁸³ *Tshig don rin po che bang mdzod* 462.6-463.2: *gdod ma'i gzhi 'od kyi khang pa can / chos nyid dag pa'i ye gdangs chen po las / ye shes kyi rlung thugs rje rig pa'i snying po can g.yos pas / nang gsal phyir shar te / ka dag gi nam mkha' la lhun grub sku dang ye shes kyi nyi zla gza' skar dang bcas pa / shel 'od phyir snang ba ltar snang la /*.

Bodies and Gnoses, appear externally like light [within] a crystal.

Conclusion: The Three Inseparable Rings of the Mystery

Ultimately, the three Gnoses appear like three Borromean rings,⁸⁴ inseparable yet distinct; undivisible in the unfolding of our own being, but variously described in terms of language. The synthetic table of our main results (see below) shows that the Three Gnoses form the very structure of the *Man ngag sde* view of reality, the interplay of macrocosm and microcosm, and of its praxis and soteriology. By definition, the Three Gnoses are gnoses, so literally they are not affected by *i*-gnorance. But if this remains true from the point of view of Primordial Purity, or Essence, on the other hand, from the point of view of Spontaneous Accomplishment, or Nature, their dynamic power (*rtsal*), brings up the problem of the correct recognition of the own manifestation (*rang snang*) of the Base. And this is the heart of *rDzogs chen* gnoseology and soteriology, with the key term of *thugs rje*, literally the Mind-Lord which is to be principally defined as Pure Awareness, a state in which Wisdom and Compassion,⁸⁵ cognition and emotion are intrinsically inseparable. *Thugs rje* is thus the “Intelligence of the Heart.” We have discussed that this term *thugs rje* must have been skillfully chosen in this respect, in a way similar to the use of the term *byang chub sems* (*bodhicitta*) in *rDzogs chen*, exposing the view of the indivisibility of *ka dag* and *lhun grub*.

We have also shown that the term “dynamic power” (*rtsal*), often considered in its association with Compassion (*thugs rje'i rtsal*, or *rig pa'i rtsal*), actually applies, according to Klong chen pa, to all Three Gnoses. This brings thus much more complexity, notably with the analysis of the Three Gnoses as the ground for the manifestation of the universe and beings. Further research needs to be done on this notion of *rtsal*, and the semantically connected terms such as display (*rol pa*), ornament (*rgyan*), etc.

Bon po sources need also to be examined, particularly the Bon po triad of *Ma bu rtsal*, the Mother (Base, *gzhi*), the Child (Awareness, *rig pa*) and the dynamic power (*rtsal*), would bring more elements about the notion of Compassion=Awareness at the heart of *rDzogs chen* gnoseology and its relation with dynamic power.

Through the study of the Three Gnoses, the specificity of *rDzogs chen* appears clearly. The possible influence of *Chan* seems here par-

⁸⁴ On the Three Gnoses as inseparable knots according to canonical literature, see Achard 2005: 87-88.

⁸⁵ We may even say “love.”

ticularly limited since this specific triad has no strict equivalent⁸⁶ and that the *Chan* view is much more limited to non-conceptuality, whereas it is only one aspect within the Three Gnoses.

On the question of the possible connection of *rDzogs chen* with non-dualist Śaivism highlighted by Achard (1999), some hypotheses may be formulated for future research. Generally speaking, the relation between *ka dag* and *lhun grub* shows some parallels with the couple of Śiva and his Śakti. But more specifically, it is in the *Sāṃkhya* tradition, that we may find some correspondences with the Three Gnoses of *rDzogs chen*. Particularly, we have suggested here that *rang bzhin* as the second Gnosis could possibly be the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit *prakṛti*. This hypothesis can also draw a philosophical parallel between *rang bzhin* in *rDzogs chen* and *prakṛti* in *Sāṃkhya* with their parallel uses of fivefold classifications regarding their modes of manifestation.⁸⁷ In this perspective, Essence (*ngo bo*: **vabhāva*) could be considered, but with much more difficulty, as an apophatic version of *Sāṃkhya*'s *puruṣa*. The next term of comparison brings more interest: Compassion, that is to say Awareness, could be equated to *buddhi*, the Intellect, first and purely sattvic element of the manifestation of *prakṛti*. Here we find a problem very similar to the Three Gnoses in *rDzogs chen*: the Intellect (*buddhi*) is both the first layer of the manifestation of *prakṛti*, thus the beginning of illusion (*māyā*), yet the instrument of liberation (*mokṣa*) in order to go back to the source. This idea share similar features with the somehow ambivalent notion of Compassion (*thugs rje*) = Pure Awareness (*rig pa*), the key-problem of recognition, and the question of the apparition of ignorance. The ontological hierarchy of *puruṣa*, *prakṛti* and *buddhi*, seem also parallel to the procession from Essence to Nature and Compassion: from the Absolute to manifestation. Strictly speaking, the hierarchy between

⁸⁶ Nevertheless, a possible Sinitic origin of the doctrine of the Three Gnoses has been considered to be the “Three Greats” (三大): “Essence” (體), “Function” (用) and “Attributes” (相) within the “Unique Mind” (一心), from the commentaries based on the Chinese text of *The Awakening of the Faith of the Great Vehicle* (大乘起信論, **Mahāyāna Śraddhotpāda Śāstra*), attributed to Aśvaghōṣa (80?-150?). Not having fully examined this Chinese literature, we cannot conclude, but with the materials presented in this paper, we hope that experts in Chinese Buddhism may be able to do so. Our conviction remains that the *Man ngag sde* system, with its specific visionary techniques, cannot be subsumed under what is known of Chinese Buddhism.

⁸⁷ Both notions, *rang bzhin* in *rDzogs chen* and *prakṛti* in *Sāṃkhya* are related to the use of fivefold classification in order to describe the process of manifestation. *Sāṃkhya* counts within *prakṛti* five sense-capacities, five action-capacities, five subtle elements, five gross elements. Even if there is no strict equivalent in *rDzogs chen* of the three *guṇa*-s (*sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas*) defining *prakṛti* in *Sāṃkhya*, we find the notion of an undetermination that can bring the possibilities of cyclic existence (degradation of light) or Buddhahood (self-illumination).

the Three Gnoses in explained in *rDzogs chen* according to the hierarchy of the *trikāya*. The similarity with *Sāṃkhya* is seen here as a possible indicator of the connection between *rDzogs chen* and Śaivism, since *Sāṃkhya*, reinterpreted, has continued to serve as a philosophical background for tantric yogic practices. But the authors of the present paper not being experts in this school, its use or evolution within Śaivism, the terminological parallels with *rDzogs chen* are simply given here to attract the attention of Indologists and envision future collaboration between them and Tibetologists.

Such comparisons, to be pertinent, need to combine the study of philosophical discourses and contemplative practices. And the fact that the same contemplative practices can be explained according to different philosophical discourses or schools leads to a greater difficulty, together with the question of mutual, complex borrowings, over long and repeated periods of time. The tradition of *rDzogs chen*, present in both Tibetan Buddhism and Bon, was situated at the crossroads of the many civilizations of Asia, central Asia, and beyond (parallels can even be found in Neoplatonism).⁸⁸ The mystery of its

⁸⁸ Some interesting similarities between *rDzogs chen* and Neoplatonism have already been noted (Guenther 1994: 1-33; Arguillère 2007) and would need to be fully investigated in close collaboration with Hellenistic scholars. We have found that in some passages, Plotinus discusses visionary experiences in a way that is strikingly similar to the explanations of *thod rgal* practices in *rDzogs chen*. In particular, see the following:

“The eye is not wholly dependent upon an outside and alien light; there is an earlier light within itself, a more brilliant, which it sees sometimes in a momentary flash. At night in the darkness a gleam leaps from within the eye: or again we make no effort to see anything; the eyelids close; yet a light flashes before us; or we rub the eye and it sees the light it contains. This is sight without the act, but it is the truest seeing, for it sees light whereas its other objects were the lit not the light.” (V 5, 7, 23) English translation, p. 409. Hereafter is another striking and beautiful example:

“Suddenly, swept beyond it all by the very crest of the wave of Intellect surging beneath, he is lifted and sees, never knowing how; the vision floods the eyes with light, but it is not a light showing some other object, the light is itself the vision. No longer is there thing seen and light to show it, no longer Intellect and object of Intellection; this is the very radiance that brought both Intellect and Intellectual object into being for the later use and allowed them to occupy the quester’s mind. With This he himself becomes identical, with that radiance whose Act is to engender Intellectual-Principle, not losing in that engendering but for ever unchanged, the engendered coming to be simply because that Supreme exists. If there were no such principle above change, no derivative could rise.” (VI 7, 36, 17) English translation, p. 590.

In his reading of Plotinus, Pierre Hadot (1993) notes that some passages of his works refer explicitly to the existence of a tradition of “spiritual exercises” in Neoplatonism. But like in ancient forms of tantrism, such practices were never written down but orally transmitted from master to disciple. Plotinus’ own master, Ammonius Saccas, is also famous for having refused to write down his own

origins looks unfathomable. And this is not only true historically, but also philosophically, since it emerged from the deepest contemplative inquiries into the mystery of the universe, life and intelligence, which form the irreducible contents of the doctrine of the Three Gnoses.

teachings and asked total secrecy to his students. This secrecy was only revealed in the exoteric form by some disciples like Plotinus. The similarities of Plotinus' thought with *rDzogs chen* may lead to another examination of the supposedly Eastern influences of Plotinus, who according to Porphyry, came to Rome only because of the failure of his expedition to Persia and India, encouraged by his own master to go there to meet their sages. Research on historical exchanges and connections would require the combination of expertises in many cultural and linguistic areas from Plotinus' Alexandria, to India and Tibet, with Persia and ancient Indo-Greek kingdoms as complex multicultural areas in between. Note that it is in this intermediate region of Persia, or more largely central Asia, that the Bon po point out the origin of their own tradition under the name "sTag gzig."

Synthetic table of the Three Gnoses according to Klong chen pa and his Sources

BASE (gzhi) (primordial: ye gzhi)	THE UNIQUE SPHERE (<i>thig le nyag gcig</i>)				
	KA DAG		LHUN GRUB		DBYER MED
	3 GNOSES (<i>ye shes gsum</i>)	ESSENCE (<i>ngo bo</i>)	NATURE (<i>rang bzhin</i>)	COMPASSION = "MIND-LORD" (<i>thugs rje</i>)	
	Qualifications (in Youthful Vase Body) [Mode of <i>ka dag</i> & Es- sence]	Empty (<i>stong pa</i>)	Clear (<i>gsal ba</i>)	Unobstructed (<i>ma 'gags pa</i>) All-Pervasive (<i>kun khyab</i>) = Awareness (<i>rig pa</i>)	
	Base manifes- tation (<i>gzhi snang</i>): dynamic power (<i>rtsal</i>) [Mode of <i>lhun grub</i> & Nature]	Field providing space Dimension of non-conceptual space	Self-Radiance of the Five Gnoses = Five Lights / Colours	Mere Knowledge and Awareness Capacity to differentiate objects	
	Mode of Indivisibility	Emptiness-Clarity	Clarity- Emptiness	Awareness- Emptiness Appearance- Emptiness	
	RECOGNITION ► Basis of Liberation (<i>grol gzhi</i>)	Primordial Buddhahood (<i>ye sangs rgyas</i>): directly to ► FRUIT			
	NON- RECOGNITION ► Basis of illusion (<i>'khrul gzhi</i>)	Out- side	Inside	In- side	Outside
		Space	Universal basis (<i>kun gzhi</i>) Ground for 8 conscious- nesses	Light of Na- ture ▼ Illu- sion of the body	Light of Reflec- tion ▼ Five ele- ments & objects
	-----	Illusion of ignorance (<i>ma rig pa</i>)		Diffusion outside of the dynamic power as grasping = energy (<i>rlung</i>) which produces ◀ the five elements and animates them	
	3 Ignorances	Illusion of body (<i>lus</i>) & objects (<i>yul</i>)		Illusion of mind (<i>sems</i>)	
		Ignorance itself		4 Conditions (<i>rkyen bzhi</i>) of ignorance	
		Ignorance of the single identity of the cause		Discriminative ignorance	
	Ignorance of the single identity of the cause		Ignorance of the co-emergence		

PATH (<i>lam</i>)	Main practice	[Breakthrough (<i>khregs chod</i>)]	Direct Tran- scendence (<i>thod rgal</i>)	Breakthrough (<i>khregs chod</i>)
	Associated Purification	[Purification of igno- rance]	Purification of the body and objects	Purification of the mind
	Visions in <i>thod rgal</i>	Buddha-bodies (<i>sku</i>)	Lights (' <i>od</i>)	Gnoses (<i>ye shes</i>)
FRUIT (' <i>bras bu</i>)	3 Buddha -Bodies (<i>sku gsum</i>)	Body of Reality (<i>chos sku</i>)	Body of Enjoyment (<i>longs sku</i>)	Body of Emanation (<i>sprul sku</i>)
	Buddha's Attributes	Body (<i>sku</i>)	Speech (<i>gsung</i>)	Mind (<i>thugs</i>)
	Tenfold Classification of Buddha's Gnoses	3 Gnoses ----- 1. Essence 2. Nature 3. Compassion [overlapping classi- fication]	5 Gnoses ----- 1. <i>Dharmadhātu</i> 2. Mirror-like 3. Equality 4. Discernment 5. Persistent action	2 Gnoses ----- 1. of things as they are (<i>ji lta ba</i>) 2. as many as they are (<i>ji snyed pa</i>)

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